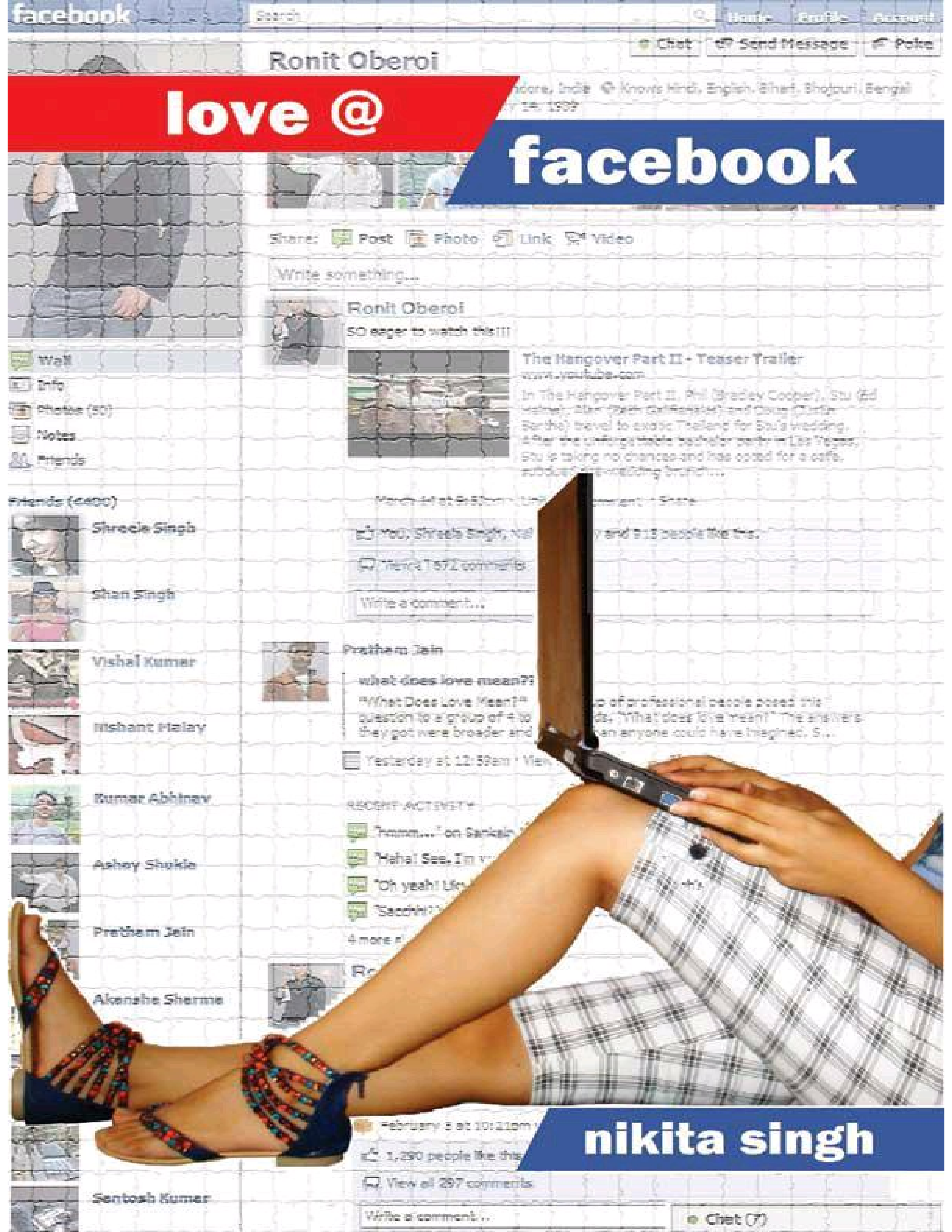
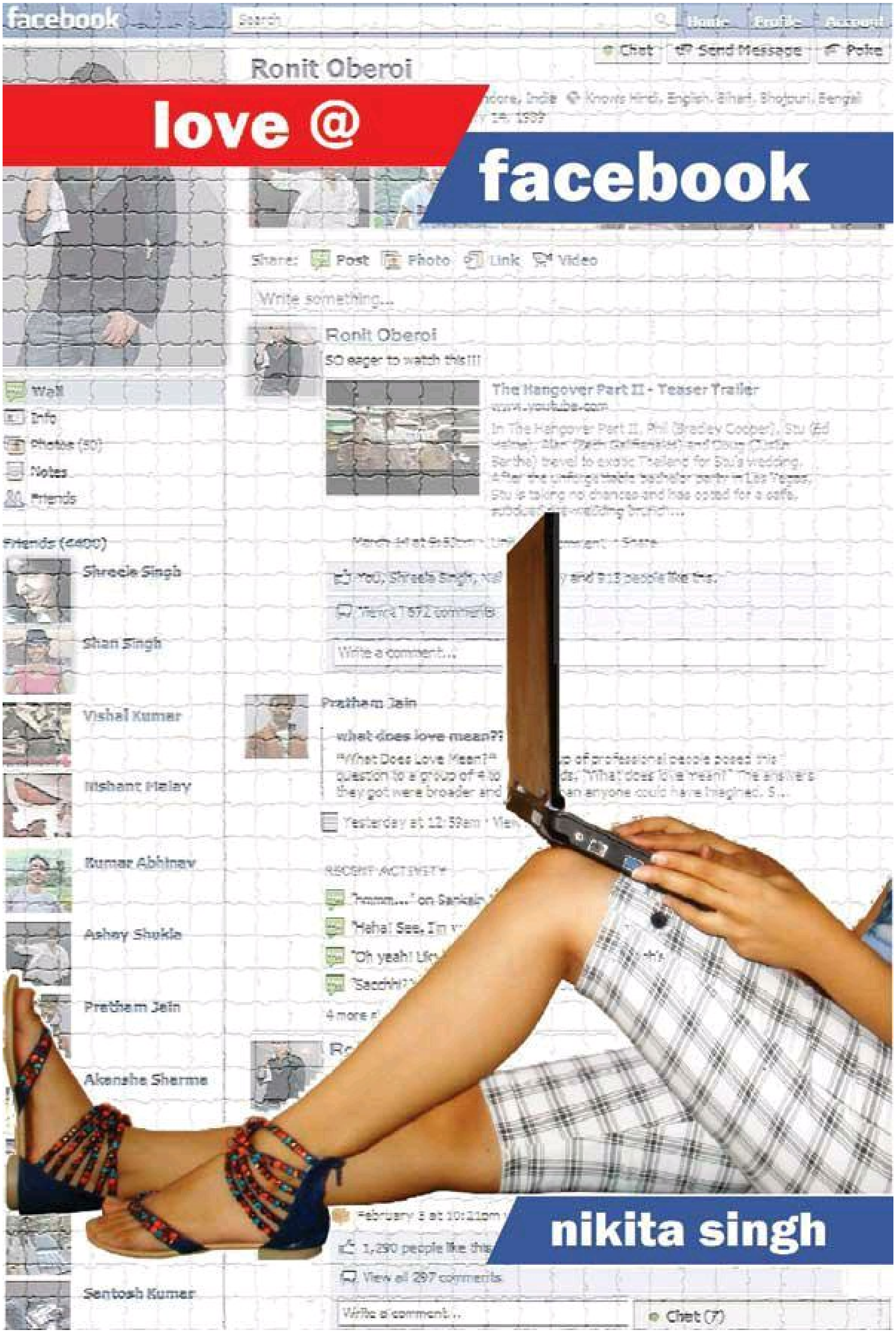


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Dedicated to

Papa, for you are, have always been and will always be my Hero!

A Note of Thanks . . .

I'll start with thanking my family, each and every member of which is a gem, and has set such high standards that it's impossible for me to match. Well, I'm starting!

Papa and Maa, for a million reasons including being such avid readers and passing on the trait to me. Nishant Malay, for being the best brother ever and never ever praising my work! Hmph! Neha Singh, for rating my book 5/5. Flattery is the only reason that got your name here, Mini! And of course, the cover you helped me design.

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When I locked myself at home for a couple of weeks to write this book and didn't receive a single call from a single friend, I realised exactly how antisocial I'd been. Still, for those who stuck by my side (read – received my calls!) – Pratham Jain, Rohan/Ankit Rai (whichever of your names you prefer!), Akansha Sharma, Pooja Singh and Viyali Michael for always being available for my midnight panic attacks and violent mood swings. Socially ill-equipped that I am, I find it easier to maintain relations by phone!

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Mr. Amit Kumar, Mrs. Rashmi Kapila and Mr. Durgesh Tiwari for being the best-est teachers in the world and for seeing potential in me that I didn't know existed! I'll try to make you proud!

Guruji, Sri Sri Paramhansa Yogananda, for all his teachings and for writing *Autobiography of a Yogi*, the best book I've read till date.

And thanks, to the wonderful people at Pustak Mahal, for tolerating me and taking time to answer my Oh-so-lame queries! I know I can be a bug at times!

Before You Start . . .

Guy stumbles upon a cute girl (more like, a cute girl's Display Picture!) on Facebook, sends her a Friend Request. Girl receives his request, checks out his Profile, finds him decent and accepts. Messages are exchanged. Late night Chats follow. Hot Photos are clicked and Uploaded solely for the other person's eyes. Romantic Notes are posted . . . LOVE! In its purest form!

Well, if you bought *Love @ Facebook* expecting this, let me tell you that this is exactly what this book is *not* about!

So what is L@F about? I'll tell you, but first you tell me something – How many of you have added an upcoming VJ/ a model/ a TV actor/ a writer as a friend on Facebook? And why? Tell me what would you do if that person someday decides to pay you more attention than you'd ever dreamt of? It's obvious that you like him/her, (why else would you add him?) and now your favourite Star is noticing you. How would you react?

Vatsala is dazzled. Vatsala, who? The girl whose story you're about to read!

L@F is the story of Vatsala and how her life takes a U-turn in a few months' time. How she, the Ice Princess, comes out of her shell, lets herself believe in all things romantic and allows herself – very *very* foolishly – to fall in love. With two guys. At the same time.

Ronit, the smoking hot celebrity who's now taking time out to flirt with her and Ankit, the best friend, who she swears she isn't romantically attracted to. It doesn't help that both of them are sexy to the extent that should be made illegal! Now if only she could decide who she loved more!

L@F is about crushes. And how the crush, if allowed, can turn into love or madness or obsession, depending upon the level to which you are mentally retarded. And if you're retarded emotionally and socially too… well, God help you!

So, what are you waiting for? Turn the page and dive into Vatsala's world!

P.S. For those who think this is my true story: *I'm capable of independent thinking!* And oh! I stole this last line from Dexter (the serial killer, not the nerd!).

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Chat-1

First Chat

September 1st, 2010

"Oh my God, this guy is so hot!" I exclaimed as I set my eyes on a VJ hosting a show on MTV. It was a Sunday evening and I was getting bored at home. Weekends are supposed to be fun. And what fun I was having, browsing through television channels, trying to find something remotely interesting to watch! Trust me, it was a difficult job. No decent Hindi movie starts until eight and no decent English movie starts until nine on Sunday nights. And one can watch only so much Discovery/ Nat Geo! So, unless you want to see retired cricketers and TV actors who don't have anything better than laughing at lame jokes or watch repeats of award shows telecasted every single week, you're out of luck! So as I flipped through channels trying to find some good advertisements to watch (yes, I was that bored and desperate), this VJ caught my eye.

Smoky eyes, strong jaw line, awesome hair . . . I called Jaanvi up.

"Hey," she greeted.

"Hi. Are you at home?" I asked.

"Yeah, you're coming?" Aww . . . she missed me!

"No. If I come to your place, Butters is gonna miss me here," I replied.

"Butters, who?"

"Butters, my couch. I've spent the whole freaking day lazing on this freaking couch. It would've been rude to call it 'couch' anymore. So I named it," I explained seriously.

"How generous of you," she laughed. "So, what's going on?"

"Nothing remarkably fascinating. I was just bonding with Butters and was getting bored. Until I came across this guy on TV . . ."

"What channel?"

"MTV"

"Okay, hold on for a second . . ." she said and switched on her TV. "Who's he? I don't think I've seen him before on any other

show," she asked a moment later.

"Same here. I guess he's new at MTV. But isn't he hot? Like *smouldering*?"

"No kidding! And like . . . so tall! *Perfect*!" Jaanvi chuckled. She always did that, taking in the height of any guy she came across. Not any guy, mind you, any cute/hot guy! But it was all well justified because she herself was really tall (5'9") and it was difficult finding good guys who were tall enough, too. So, if the first thing I looked for in a guy was eyes/jaw line, she took in their height. I might not have enviable long legs like her but being 5'5" was a boon in some respects!

"Yeah, tall too. Complexion . . ."

"Dark, but not very – pass!" she declared.

"Hmm . . . and I like the way he's speaking. Voice all rich and confident, stance all casual, with an air of authority about him that says you-don't-wanna-mess-with-me."

"Super sexy!"

"Drop-dead gorgeous!"

We laughed. "Anyway, are you coming to college tomorrow?" she asked.

"I guess. What else do I have worth doing? It's not like I have a life or something!"

"Chill, we'll find awesome boyfriends someday and then our lives will be rocking," she said with conviction. I guess either she honestly believed that or was desperately trying to make herself believe!

"Well, till that 'someday' decides to gratify us by making its most awaited appearance, let's just spend our weekends on our couches, checking out hot guys on TV!"

That night, no TV channel aired a watchable movie. Indian television's standard is dropping by the second, I tell you. So, out of fear of dying of boredom, I logged into my Facebook account. Owing to the stroke of good luck I was having that day, none of my friends were online. Not a single person out of my fifty-four friends on FB.

It wasn't strange, actually. It was a Sunday night and unlike me, all my friends seemed to be having a life. Not everyone is as *berozgaar* as me! So, with no one to chat, I spent an hour commenting on friends' Statuses and Photos, changing my Profile Info and answering silly quizzes.

But soon I ran out of things to do to pass time with. It was just eleven o' clock, so sleeping was out of question. I was a strong believer of a simple theory – *a.m. is to sleep, p.m. is to stay up!* It was a shame that my college timings didn't permit me to follow the lifestyle of my choice, but honest to God, I kept trying!

My mind started wandering and finally stopped at the VJ I had seen on MTV that day. Few minutes on Google Search and I had his biography in front of me. Ronit Oberoi aka VJ Ron. That was all I needed to know – his name. I ran a search on FB for him. And there he was!

I was surprised to find 'Add As A Friend' as an option. Usually, Profiles of all big celebrities had just the option of 'Like' in them; they can't be 'Friends' with millions of fans! VJ Ron had 2787 friends. Whoa! Famous, but not *that* famous either. Quite predictably, I sent him a Friend Request.

"I still can't believe he accepted my Request!" I said for the zillionth time.

"And I still don't see what's so unbelievable about that! He has thousands of Friends. He adds everyone," Jaanvi chided.

"And who are we talking about, again?" Ankit, who had just joined us, asked.

"VJ Ron. You know him?" I asked.

"Yes. He hosts 'Weekly Top 5' at MTV, right?"

"Absolutely, and guess what! He added me as a Friend on FB. Can you believe that? It's so freaking awesome!" I exclaimed.

"It's no big deal," Jaanvi injected. "He adds everyone. He's a budding star, grabbing all the attention he can get."

"Oh, you're just jealous!" I teased.

"Why would I be?" she retorted.

"Hey, easy girls! Listen, why don't we, I and Jaanvi, send him Requests too? If he adds us, there isn't any need for argument," Ankit proposed.

And he did. VJ Ron added both Ankit and Jaanvi. So Jaanvi won the argument? I couldn't let that happen! VJ Ron might add everyone who sent him a Request but he surely didn't reply to everyone's Messages, did he?

So, in order to be the one who wins the argument, I resolved to send him Messages and coax a reply out of him anyhow. It wasn't all that easy. After five Messages in a row, one every night, the sixth morning he finally did grace my Messages with a reply.

Ronit Oberoi: Hey!
Thanks for all the messages.
I have been really busy lately.
Catch you sometime. :):)

He had replied to my message which said –

Vatsala Rathore: I hope when I wake up tomorrow, I have a message from you in my inbox. Good night :)

Who wouldn't reply if you make it look like it's your only wish in the world!

Chat-2

Edible

September 6th, 2010

After getting that first reply from VJ Ron, I started liking him even more. One evening, a few days later, I had the chance to have a proper conversation with him. I had logged in on FB and noticed that he had added a new Photo Album to his Profile. I started checking out his pictures and Posting Comments on all the hot ones, and really, there were a lot of hot ones!

It didn't go unnoticed; he sent me a message.

Ronit: :D :D

Vatsala: You're so happy you're sending me smileys!

Usually good-looking people know they look good and get used to compliments ;)

Ronit: Smileys are nice in chat. And since you're not available there . . .

Vatsala: Oh! Actually I'm using Facebook on my i-phone, so that's why I'm not available on chat . . .

Ronit: I figured.

Of course he did. There is a caption stating 'sent via i-phone' right below my Messages! I can't get much stupider than this. Actually, on second thought, I can!

Vatsala: But really, you do look quite smashing in those pictures . . . Edible ;)

Ronit: Thank you :) You're cute yourself too . . . Edible :-*

What? He complimented me! On my looks? I hadn't put up my own photo as my Display Picture, so that means he checked out my Photos from my Albums. *He visited my Profile!* I almost fainted.

Vatsala: OMG!! You kissed me!!!

Ronit: You're awesome pretty . . . Definitely kissable! ;)

Vatsala: And now you complimented me! I'm hyperventi-lating!! :D

Ronit: Now that you mention compliments . . .

'Edible' is a toned down version of some very dirty compliments! B-)

Vatsala: I wouldn't know anything about that . . . Never received any! My stare scares boys away!!

Which was true. For people who didn't know me, I was this arrogant bitch who looked down upon everyone below the league of Brad Pitt!

Ronit: Naah! I wouldn't look into those eyes too much!

Now that's a dirty compliment!!!! :P :P

Vatsala: I don't even know what that means, but I'm blushing! ;)

Ronit: Ah! Never mind! ;)

Vatsala: Actually I do have some idea what that might mean . . .

Mills & Boon provides good education!!

Ronit: And fills girls' mind with such bullshit expectations . . .

No man has ever been able to live up to them! Poor us!! ;)

Vatsala: Aww . . . :P :P

Next day, I retold the entire conversation to Ankit and Jaanvi, blushing all the while. After all, it's not everyday that a superstar (yes, I know I'm exaggerating) compliments you like that!

And when Jaanvi said, "I so envy you!" It made my day!

Chat-3

Ranchi and Rains

September 8th, 2010

When you mention the name of the city Ranchi anywhere in India, the question you invariably get asked by people is, "Dhoni's city?"

Yes, Dhoni's city. That's where I've spent all eighteen years of my life. Ranchi – the capital city of Jharkhand. *My city.*

Not only Mahendra Singh Dhoni lives in the same city as I, he also lives in my colony, less than a kilometre away from my house. But that's hardly something to boast about, as according to the census conducted in the year 2000, a total of one lakh people reside at Harmu. So you can imagine how many people live there now, in the year 2010. Impressed with Dhoni's helicopter shot (among other things!), the Jharkhand Government presented him a big chunk of land in my colony, where he promptly constructed an imposing bungalow which soon became one of the major tourist attraction sites of the city.

Another interesting thing about Ranchi is its climate, which was generally pleasant; neither too hot, nor too cold. But if the temperature gets too hot in the day, you can be cent per cent sure that it'll rain in the evening. While most people considered that a virtue, I didn't.

"It's raining. Hard," I said into the phone.

"I can see that," Ankit stated from the other end.

"I don't like rains."

"That's an understatement. You *hate* rains."

"Why is it raining then?"

"You don't really expect me to answer that, do you?"

"I guess not. I ain't going to college."

"You should've said that before. I'm already ready."

"I didn't have it planned. I just woke up to see it's raining so badly. I'm not leaving home in that mess. And anyway, I ain't going doesn't mean you need to bunk too!"

He ignored the last sentence. "You woke up now? It's 10:15."

"I could've made it to college by eleven."

"Yeah, it's not like you have to bathe or something."

"You know me," I smiled. I don't like taking bath. Except for college days when I absolutely have to, I don't think I bathe ever. "But I would've taken bath had I decided to go to college."

"Hey, come on! Don't take bath if you don't want to, but at least come to college."

"There isn't a way I'm going out in all that filth. Rain is bad. Evil. It destroys earth."

"Although I don't agree—"

"Why? Look around yourself. Such a sad climate. So moist and all . . . how can someone in his right mind consider it even remotely romantic? And the mud! Don't even get me started—"

"Let's not get into all that. I'm not going to college either," he changed the topic.

"I know. Your whole world revolves around me!"

"Yes, your majesty!"

Which was kind of true. Ankit's world did revolve around me. I met Ankit when he joined my school in XI standard. We were best friends in no time. We, despite being so unlike each other, had similar choice in movies, music and novels. That's what got us talking at first.

Two years later, after passing out from school, we were both set to go to different cities for further studies. That was when my father's sudden death made me decide to stay at home with my mother. I hated to leave her alone at such a time. So I took admission in a local college to pursue BBA.

Ankit, being sweet as he was, didn't feel like leaving me alone, especially given the circumstances. So he stayed back at Ranchi with me.

Trust me when I say, I tried my level best to make him go, but he had made up his mind and did not budge from his decision. Putting his career at stake for a girl he knew he had no chance of wooing . . . I mean, *who does that*?

I knew he had feelings for me, right from the beginning. He never said such in words, but you don't need words to know that someone loves you. Seriously, words are overrated!

I loved him too, but in a completely different, *unromantic* way. And that was because I was unromantic. Yes, there had been a time when I couldn't get enough of songs by Enrique Iglesias and Back Street Boys and kept watching movies like 'Serendipity' and 'A Walk to Remember' time and again. And yes, I used to read all that gooey and gross stuff by Mills and Boon too, which amazingly didn't make me gag and puke then.

But that was all in the past. I wasn't that girl anymore. I was over that cheesy and romantic phase before I entered college. And I knew that the so-called, super hyped term 'love' didn't exist in the real world. Okay. It might exist for some, but I just ain't that lucky!

Ankit thought otherwise. Now, when we were in the third and the last year of our college, I think he was still in love with that sweet little naïve girl that I was four years back. I assure you, I wasn't sweet in any sense of the word anymore. I bite!

So anyway, he ended up staying at Ranchi with me and joined my college. And though our tastes in music, movies and novels no longer matched (I had moved onto Eminem and Linkin Park and ditched romantic movies and novels), we were closer than ever.

He was my anchor. You see, I am the type of person for whom everything happens in extremes. Either I absolutely love something or I absolutely hate it. It was all either black or white; my brain wasn't programmed to recognise the greys.

I made spontaneous decisions and always went with my instincts, which happened to be very shitty, making me end up in extremely shitty situations. Ankit got me out of them. And he was the one who thought of good cover-ups to hide whatever I did.

He was that type of a person—sane, caring and thoughtful—My exact opposite.

And he deserved someone far better than me. Someone with brains!

"Get a girlfriend."

"What? Where did that come from?" he asked, puzzled.

"Doesn't matter. Just get a girlfriend."

"It's so easy for you to say. Do you know how difficult it is to find a decent girl in the city?"

"Not for you! You're typical tall, dark and handsome prototype. You can get almost any girl around here."

"Almost," he said softly.

No, no, no, no, no. Don't steer the conversation my way! I knew where it was going. *Almost* any girl. Not me.

"Don't worry, I'll help you find one," I said and hung up the call. I hated the conversations that included me, him and love.

I mean, why me? I wasn't even all that good-looking. And he could literally get any girl in the city. I might not have mentioned before, but he was the perfect recipe for the dream boyfriend – smart, witty, good sense of humour, caring and romantic. The type of guy who'd never cheat on his girl. Not to mention, he was an amazing dancer. Plus so damn gorgeous! Even better looking than VJ Ron. VJ Ron . . . I logged into my Facebook Account and started checking out his Photos. Maybe he looked better than Ankit, but only in some Photos. In most others, Ankit beat him hands down.

That day, I don't remember exactly how many of his Photos I commented on, but I can be sure there were many. I had a simple justification – that's how I got the chance to chat with him last time. I was hoping the history would repeat itself.

Better sooner than later.

And although I did not really get a chance to chat with him, he did reply to one of the many Comments I had posted.

Vatsala: You're looking taller than I'd imagined . . . ;)

Ronit: Every inch of 5'10" Vatsala! :P

Vatsala: Perfect :D

Perfect? Not really! Ankit was taller. Just by an inch, but taller.

Chat-4

Battlefield

September 10th, 2010

"I can die any minute," I whispered.

"I'm not doing much better either," Jaanvi whispered back.

"How much more time?"

She checked her watch. "Forty minutes. The class started just five minutes ago!"

"Aargh." Classes are boring, everybody knows that. But *this* boring? Five minutes into it and I was already at the risk of dozing off any moment. Some teachers just know how to press the snooze button in their students!

Jaanvi took out a novel to read. Some book by Nicholas Sparks. She was a big romantic. Sometimes, I used to wonder why Ankit and Jaanvi weren't dating. They were so like each other—hard-core romantics (in other words—lunatics!).

I took out my cell phone and logged into Facebook. We were sitting in the last bench, as we always did, so no one would notice (I hoped!).

There were several Notifications waiting for me. One caught my eye – "Samarth Jain, Kritika Sen and 7 other people commented on Ronit Oberoi's status."

The last Comment was from some boy named Samarth, posted just minutes ago.

Samarth Jain: U suck mayn!!!

Mayn? I think he meant 'man.' People invent new spellings for words now-a-days. They think it is cool (or should I say *kewl*?) I think it's totally wannabe.

I mean, I don't mind as long as it's an abbreviation, but more often than not, their invented spellings contain larger number of alphabets than the good old British/American English language spellings. And they are astonishingly perplexing.

Even more shockingly, people now invent names for themselves. How else can you explain the weird names you come across on Facebook? Like Princess Priya, Angel Rockkstar, Broken Heart and Harsh Beatzz? Their parents surely didn't name them that!

If you have an Account on Facebook, I'm sure you'll agree that sometimes you encounter some really irritating people. People

who'll Tag you in random Photos and you end up getting a Notification every time someone posts a Comment on that Photo. It'll be a photo of a dog and people will Comment stuff like 'choo chweeeet' (so sweet). It'll be a photo of a guitar, and not knowing what else to say, people will Comment 'thanx 4 d tag' (thanks for the tag).

And then there are people who used the words 'dude' and 'buddy' way too much. They'll probably call you 'dear' or 'sweetie' the first time they talk to you. Or call you mam (ma'am).

And people who recently discovered meanings of abbreviations like 'lol' and 'rofl' will type 'hahaha lolzz' after every Comment.

Don't even get me started on the excessive use of the alphabet Z and exclamatory mark.

Anyway, back to the Comment (I tend to get carried away sometimes!). What Samarth posted was uncalled for. Why did he Add Ronit as his Friend in the first place if he thought he 'sucked'?

I decided to ask him precisely that, for two reasons – I loved picking up fights and I was getting really bored.

Vatsala Rathore: What are you doing in his friend list then, Samarth?

Samarth Jain: Juzz tryin 2 c y he hays such beeg fayn foloing!!!!!!

I guess he hadn't invented spellings for 'he' and 'such' yet!

Vatsala Rathore: He's a celebrity. Duh!

Samarth Jain: Heezz juzz a guy hoo toks rubbish on TV. :P :P :P

It took me some time to decode that.

Vatsala Rathore: Do I smell jealousy?

Samarth Jain: Y wood I b jluz??? I m Samarth Jain n m happi s gawd made mea . . .

This Comment was at least six times longer and I couldn't figure out the rest of it. So there's no way I could tell you what it was!

Vatsala Rathore: Your comment was pretty much undecipherable. I didn't get a thing.

Samarth Jain: Huh??

Do I even need to tell you that he was dumb?

Vatsala Rathore: Whatever.

Samarth Jain: Woteva??? I get dat a lot 4m gurlz . . . try sumthng new!!!! :P :P

Vatsala Rathore: Get a life!

Samarth Jain: Hahaha!! :D :P ohkay I wil!!!!

I left that space then and started checking other Notifications when he commented again.

Samarth Jain: Kan u cum on chat???

Vatsala Rathore: You're not in my friend list.

Samarth Jain: I snt u a rqst . . .

I ignored his Friend Request right away. I had been looking for some entertainment. This guy was just plain annoying!

Samarth Jain: Heyllo???

Vatsala Rathore: What?

Samarth Jain: Add mea!!

Vatsala Rathore: Why?

Samarth Jain: I lyk ur toks! U r witty . . . I LYK!!

Vatsala Rathore: Thanks, but no.

Samarth Jain: Yyyy??

Vatsala Rathore: I don't add unknown people.

Hell, I didn't add most known people either! Having just fifty-four friends on Facebook is pretty unusual. Most people exceeded that figure in their first week of joining Facebook.

Samarth Jain: U no VJ Roan???

Vatsala Rathore: I'm pretty sure it's Ron, not Roan.

Samarth Jain: Itz prnouncd dat way!!!

Vatsala Rathore: Oh? I thought it was more like Raw-n. Silly of me.

Samarth Jain: Y r u so angryyyy?

I noticed he put just one question mark this time. To make up for the four 'Y's, I guess! But this guy was really getting on my nerves by then. I decided to ignore him; the class had started to seem less annoying!

But he just won't let me be. He kept sending me Messages and Friend Requests every time I ignored one and posting Comments on Ronit's Status. The last one said:

Samarth Jain: Juzz tel mea y u r nt addin mea???

Vatsala Rathore: Because you are exceptionally irritating and I'm getting exceedingly pissed off!

Samarth Jain: K. f9. Biii!!!

He stopped posting Comments on Ronit's Status after that but kept sending me Messages.

"This boy is *really* irritating me now," I said under my breath.

"What happened?" Jaanvi whispered.

"He just won't leave me alone. Messages and Friend Requests . . . I don't know how to get rid of him."

Jaanvi gave me a look.
I looked at her blankly in turn.
"Block him, genius!"
"Oh right," I grinned sheepishly. Why hadn't I thought of it before? I Blocked him and the Messages came to an end.
The class ended after sometime too. As we stood to leave the room, I noticed tears in Jaanvi's eyes.
"Hey, what's wrong?" I asked, concerned.
"What? Nothing," she said and turned away to put her novel back into her bag. I snatched it and looked at its cover.
"No use denying it, Jaanvi. I know you're crying, that too because of *this*? The Notebook? When you cried for A Walk to Remember, it was justified. But The Notebook? *Seriously*?"
"What? It's an emotional novel too!" she defended herself.
"But *crying*?"
"Come on! You're talking as if you've read it."
I had. Not that I was ever going to admit it. "Of course I haven't. Romance novels make me sick," I made a show of gagging.
"Then you have no right to make assumptions."
I turned and went to the next row where Ankit was sitting. "Jaanvi is crying," said I.
"Why? What happened?" he stood up.
"She's reading a book that is making her cry and I have no idea why she's still reading it."
Ankit saw the cover of the novel Jaanvi was still holding. "Ah! The Notebook . . . it's a good one."
"See? I told you," Jaanvi smirked.
"You guys are . . . are lovesick!" I said for the lack of a better word. My vocabulary isn't all that great.
"Oh? And what are you? If I remember correctly, you were fighting with some unknown prick *for a guy* just moments ago," Jaanvi challenged.
"That was because I was getting bored."
"And there aren't other ways to pass time? Fool someone else," she turned to Nilaap and said, "Let's go" before holding his arm and storming off.
She always did that. Stomping her feet and storming off was her trademark. Even then we'd be sitting together just minutes later for the next lecture.
"I really was getting bored," I was left to explain Ankit.
He nodded silently.
Later that night, I noticed that several other girls who were no doubt fans of VJ Ron, had also commented on Ronit's Status. It looked like there was a big fight going on between the girls and Samarth. He'd literally asked for it; telling Ronit that he 'sucked' on his own status. Fans were bound to get angry and react.

<u>Vatsala Rathore</u>: Oh my! Seems like people are talking here! Having fun guys?
<u>Ronit Oberoi</u>: I sure am! ;)
<u>Vatsala Rathore</u>: Girls fighting for you . . . Enjoying the scene, huh? :P
<u>Ronit Oberoi</u>: You bet! :D :P
<u>Vatsala Rathore</u>: Who wouldn't? ;)

Chat-5

Get A Girlfriend!

September 12th, 2010

That day, I exchanged a word with Ronit. When I say a word, I mean a word. And two smileys.
At one of his Photos, someone (I don't remember his name, so let's call him Jack Sparrow) had commented:

<u>Jack Sparrow</u>: You look SO ugly :P :P
<u>Vatsala Rathore</u>: Disagree with Jack. You look Fab ;)
<u>Ronit Oberoi</u>: @ Vatsala: Thanks :D :D
<u>Vatsala Rathore</u>: Pleasure! :)

It was a Sunday and I was with Ankit, in his room, watching a cricket match between Royal Challengers Bangalore and Guyana.

We were supporting RCB. Not that we were big fans of the team, but it had more Indian players and their name sounded familiar.

"Remember the talk we had a few days back?" I asked Ankit.

"Which one?"

"The one in which I told you to get a girlfriend."

"Oh. Yes, I do."

"So?"

"So what?"

"Found one yet?"

"I wasn't searching."

"I was. And guess what . . ."

"Don't tell me you found someone."

"I sure did. A perfect match," I announced, quite proud of myself.

"Not interested," he declared.

"What! Why?"

"Just like that."

"Good reason."

He shrugged.

"But really, let me at least introduce you two. Maybe you'll like her . . ." I tried to coax him.

"Not likely."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I have psychic powers."

"Was I supposed to laugh at that? Moron. Meet her once. I know she's perfect for you. You won't find a girl as sweet as her."

"You're sweet."

"Hell no!" I shouted. "Don't say that ever again." I was going through a phase when I wanted to project myself as a *bad girl*. Being called sweet was a mortal insult.

Ankit rolled his eyes.

"What? I'm serious. Don't meet her if you don't want to but at least don't call me *sweet*."

"Extremely sorry," he mocked.

"Meet her – your punishment."

"I would do almost anything for you, but not this."

"*Almost* anything?" I challenged.

"Anything."

I made him sit facing me, with his back to the television, till the match was over. And I did an extremely exaggerated version of commentary of what was happening in the match, just to make him want to watch it more.

It did work up to some extent, but I think he was pretty content with looking at me instead.

The pirate replied the next day:

> Jack Sparrow: Anything to attract his attention, haan? You know the photo is BAD.
> But you wouldn't miss a chance to flatter him . . . :P :P
> Vatsala Rathore: Aye aye, Captain! ;)

Well, I didn't exactly say that, it was just a 'yes sir' but now that we're calling him Jack Sparrow, it seemed only right to put a Captain in there somewhere.

Chat-6

Small Dragons

September 15th, 2010

I have never been more grateful to the mosquito net I slept in every night. Putting it up was merely a habit and once you get used to it, even one mosquito in your room is enough to keep you up all night.

Apart from saving me from a little blood loss every night, I didn't think it could serve any other purpose.

Until then—

That morning, it saved my life. Okay, an exaggeration again, but even if I would've survived the trauma somehow, I'm sure I'd have had a cardiac arrest, or a nervous breakdown, at the very least.

The *blessed* mosquito net saved me from all that.

"Come home," I sobbed into the phone.
"Now?" Ankit asked.
"*Right now*."
"Can I at least know why? Something happened?"
"I thought I was your best friend."
"You are. And I'm coming. But I'm worried, so can't you just tell me?"
"There's this small dragon . . . and when I say small, it's by dragons' standard size. Otherwise, it's *huge*."
"A lizard?"
"A lizard."
"Trust you to make mountains out of molehills!"
"Molehill? I woke up to see it right here in front of me. If not for the mosquito net, it would've jumped on my face!"
"And why would it want to *jump* on your face?"
"I don't know. Ask it. What is it doing on my mosquito net?"
"It fell from the ceiling. Or didn't this thought cross your mind?"
"No. because I know it didn't fall. It was trying to attack me and the mosquito net came in the way to my rescue."
"Right." I could almost picture him rolling his eyes at the other end of the phone.
"And it wants to kill me. It's giving me that look. When I first woke up, it was lying upside down, on its back, *looking at me*. And then, just to scare me even more, it turned back on its stomach. It's scarier this way; you know . . . all pale, whitish . . . Yikes!"
"You should be a fiction writer. Write a book about evil lizards, titled Small Dragons!"
"Not funny. You're coming?"
"No."
"Why?"
"Isn't aunty there?"
"No. I called for her but she didn't respond. I tried her number but her phone is ringing here at home. She must've gone for her morning walk."
"Can't you just shake the net a little? It'll fall down."
"*On the floor?* You want me dead?"
"It won't kill you! It's small."
"Okay, first of all, it *will* kill me. And second of all, it is *not* small, it's gigantic."
"I seriously doubt that."
"We're not discussing that anymore. The topic's closed. I win."
"It's seven in the morning. Why are we discussing a lizard anyway?"
"Because I want to get out of this bloody mosquito net." I really shouldn't have called it bloody. It saved my life.
"As I said, it's seven. You never wake up so early. So go back to sleep. Aunty will be back by the time you wake up."
"I can't."
"Why?"
"I need to pee. You have to come."
When he got there fifteen minutes later, we realised there was a major flaw in the plan—the door was locked.
"Open the door," he shouted from outside.
"If I were up to doing that, there wouldn't have been a need for you to come here in the first place, you dimwit."
There was a window right next to my bed which was unlocked. He opened it.
There he was – my saviour. Old T-shirt and striped pyjamas, but I'd never been happier to see him. It was like someone cast a spell upon me. I kept staring at him with unveiled affection in my expression.
"Whoa! It's huge," he said and ruined the moment. The spell broke.
"Told you."
"It was a sarcastic comment."

"I decided to overlook the sarcasm. Now, do something. Get rid of it, fast."

He picked up something from the windowsill and aimed at the lizard, which was taken by surprise and jumped from the mosquito net to the window grill. Ankit waved it away with a sweep of his hand and it disappeared out of sight.

I stared at him with my eyes wide open. I was astonished . . . *he was so brave!* The lizard jumped right in front of his face, on the grill . . . just inches away from his face and he didn't even blink an eyelid! I was seeing him under a new light. He seemed so valiant, so —

"When can I expect you to open the door for me?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah. On it."

"Are you sure you're up to it? Such a *catastrophic* incident . . . I can understand if you're too . . . shall we say, *unstable* to open the door at this moment!"

"Shut up," I said as I let him in. "Be right back," I said and went to the loo.

"The next one is indefinitely delayed" was Ronit's Status that day. I didn't have a clue what he was referring to, but as I read the Comments people had posted on the Status, I deduced he was referring to the next episodes of his TV show. It seemed like he wasn't in the country at the moment, so the shooting for his show had to be postponed. Some other VJ was replacing him on the show temporarily.

He was at Sydney, shooting for a movie. *He was an actor too?*

The last comment was by someone named Akansha Sharma.

Akansha Sharma: Oh no! Not fair!
Vatsala Rathore: Come on, give him a break! He's really busy, I hear . . .
Akansha Sharma: Yeah, he's got a movie! First RJ Ron, then VJ Ron and now an actor too!!
Vatsala Rathore: RJ? I didn't know he was an RJ too!
Akansha Sharma: Oh yes he was . . . For two years at Hot FM . . .
Vatsala Rathore: Oh, great! Where is he anyway?
Haven't seen him online since the last couple of days . . .
Akansha Sharma: I have NEVER seen him online!! Lol :D

Till this point, I'd been thinking that Akansha knew Ronit personally, judging by the way she was talking about him. It turned out she didn't . . . I wasn't going to let a chance like that pass! I rubbed in.

Vatsala Rathore: He seems really busy all the time . . .
but I've had the privilege to talk to him a few times!
Akansha Sharma: No way! Really?? I envy you! I wish I would get a chance someday!
Vatsala Rathore: No need to envy me . . . I'll give you a tip – KEEP PESTERING HIM!!
Send silly messages, post rubbish on his wall, comment on his every pic . . .
HE'S BOUND TO NOTICE!! ;) ;)
Akansha Sharma: Yeah, he'll notice then! And Tushar will kill me then . . . or dump me at least!!
Vatsala Rathore: Don't tell him! SIMPLE! :P :P
Akansha Sharma: As if I can keep a secret! And everything is open for all on FB, he'll get to know!
Vatsala Rathore: Then Chat will be the best option! Stay online all day all night long!
He'll login SOMETIME!!

We went on like that for over an hour. Yeah, I really don't have a life! Akansha told me Ronit was endorsing a denim brand and that he was a prolific blogger. RJ, VJ, actor, model and a writer, too? *Is there something he doesn't do?*

After ages of singing his praises on his status, he noticed. *Be still, my heart!*

Ronit Oberoi: This is such an ego boost! Hi Akansha :)
Vatsala Rathore: I'm here too!!
Ronit Oberoi: Hi Vatsala. And stop it! It's almost embarrassing. Though hugely flattering!
Akansha Sharma: Oh man! Oh man! Hi Ronit . . . how are you?
Vatsala Rathore: See, Akansha? I told you! THERE IS GOD, after all!!
Ronit Oberoi: Stop it already. And I am good. And yeah, there is God!
Or two very cute girls wouldn't ever be discussing me!
Vatsala Rathore: You've gotta be kidding me . . . YOU ROCK!! I'm still hyperventilating!!
Ronit Oberoi: Thank you! Made my day, the two of you!
Akansha Sharma: Thank you for the compliment Ronit!
It's the best ever compliment I got coz it's from you!
Vatsala Rathore: I got a better compliment!! He called me 'edible' once!
Akansha Sharma: Edible Vatsala! Fine by me . . . I'm happy with cute!
Ronit Oberoi: C'mon! Don't compare! I think Akansha is pretty cute too.
Everyone is awesome in her own special way. :)
Vatsala Rathore: You are succha sweet talker!

And he was! And a charmer too! We talked some nonsense for another half hour before Ronit took his leave.

Ronit Oberoi: Got to go! Catch ya guys later sometime! Pleasure talking to you guys! :)

After that conversation, I searched Ronit on Google again. He was looking *hot* in that jeans advertisement. And when I searched the movie he was cast in, *Velvet Ropes*, I discovered that his role wasn't as insignificant as he made it seem, by saying "just one of the hero's friends, nothing big!"

I got the impression that he was very modest and humble—Young, successful and still so down to earth!

Respect.

Chat-7

This Girl

October 4th, 2010

Smitten though I was with Ronit Oberoi, his towering list of success stories was quite overwhelming and I stayed off him for the next two weeks. But then, I was back again. I don't think there were many Photos of him that I didn't Comment on.

There was one Photo, in which he was wearing a jacket to die for. Quite obviously, I commented on it!

Vatsala: I NEED that jacket!! Love it . . . ;)

Sometime later, some other girl posted a Comment on that picture too.

Sonam: I need those shoes . . .

Vatsala: Yeah, the shoes too! Let's strip him!!

Sonam: Let's set the venue and date . . .

Ronit: :P

Vatsala: Venue?? Date?? MEETING HIM?? I just wish I were that lucky!! :|
STRIPPING HIM?? I just wish . . . <evil grin> ;)

Ronit: Should I feel like I'm in trouble here? ;)

Vatsala: Don't you worry sweets! It's not like we're ever gonna get that lucky!
But we girls can always wish . . . ;)

I have no idea why I called him sweets. I despised nick names and cheesy endearments.

My phone ringed. It was Jaanvi. "I won't be able to make it," she said.

"To the movie? Why?"

"Nilaap's in a crisis. So I'll be with him."

"That means both of you aren't coming?"

"Yeah. So it'll be just you and Ankit."

"But we have four seats reserved."

"Never mind."

"It's not everyday that Eyelex shows such good English movies. And Step Up 3D is totally your type. Dancing and all . . ."

"I know. And I want to. But priorities . . ."

"You'll miss it," I said and hung up.

Wasting two tickets meant three hundred bucks down the drain. I couldn't let that happen. I called Evita.

"Let's go," Ankit said when he met me at the theatre. The only reason that I was there before time was frustration. Ankit and Jaanvi never let an opportunity to remind me that I always got there ten minutes after the movie has started pass. So I had decided to arrive before them, just this once. I missed Jaanvi; I wished she was there to see me making it to the hall before time. And more importantly, before *them*!

"Wait, Praveen and Evita will be coming any moment," I said.

"They're coming too?"

"Yeah, didn't I tell you before? Jaanvi and Nilaap weren't coming, so I invited Praveen and Evita."

"Oh."

"And they said yes. Seriously, who'd want to miss a movie this good?"

"How do you know it's good even before watching it?"

"Because Step Up 2 was super awesome. Even if this one isn't all that great, it'll at least be good."

"I like the first Step Up movie more."

"Romantic that you are!"

The movie watching experience wasn't exactly something you'd call nice. Praveen and Evita hardly had anything to do with the movie; they were so *engrossed* in each other all the while. Wait, didn't I tell you before? They were dating each other (if 'dating' is the right term, that is!).

Ankit watched all romantic scenes with interest while I sat there rolling my eyes, shaking my head and eating my popcorn. The movie was more of dance and less of romance, to my intense relief.

After it ended, Praveen and Evita magically disappeared, no doubt in search of eternal paradise away from prying eyes of the world.

"I'm starved," I said and we went to my favourite food joint, Ecstasy. I'm a big foodie. Food is right there at the top of my most-important-things-in-life list. I don't care if all that junk food went straight to my butt or thighs. As long as my tongue was happy, I was happy. A couple of pounds won't kill me, right?

"You know, the only thing I don't like about Ecstasy is the kind of music they play. All slow, romantic songs . . . they're still living in the times of Enrique and Back Street Boys!'

"I thought you loved them both," Ankit said.

"I did. It's history now."

"History? It was just a few years back."

"You can't blame me! Enrique released Seven and BSB released Nevergone then." And I'd bought original copies of their albums. I do that only for the singers/bands I truly respect. Otherwise, download is always the way!

"Enrique released Euphoria this year."

"But I've grown up now."

"So you don't love him anymore?"

"I'll always love him. He was my first love. And he's hot. And I like his fast tracks like *Dirty Dancer*."

"How about *Why Not Me*?"

"Nay," I shrugged. I knew what he was getting into. The song *Why Not Me?* probably fit the situation he was in with me.

We placed the order and I logged into Facebook from my mobile. Nothing made me happier than Inbox(1). Actually, the happiness did increase manifold if that message happened to be from Ronit. In this particular instance, it was.

Ronit Oberoi: I've already been half stripped on FB ;) :P

The Message was accompanied with some "media that cannot be displayed." Sometimes, Facebook on Mobile sucked. I couldn't wait to go home to see what he had attached with that Message.

The order arrived and we attacked it. Correction – I attacked it, while Ankit ate quite gentlemanly!

The music changed.

There's this girl, the one and only wonder of this world, my world.

And it don't matter if the road gets rough, if me rich or poor.

She stay down with me if me go to war.

"Why do I feel like I've heard this song before?" I asked.

"You have. It's 'This Girl'. It was featured in Step Up 3."

"Oh, right. The ginormous cup scene?"

"Yes."

And I know we'll stand together when the world falls down.

And I know, that our forever's gonna start right now.

Yeah, there's this girl . . .

"How lame!" I said, just as a girl from a nearby table exclaimed to her friends, "I wish someone someday will sing such a song for me."

Her friend replied with, "I know. Love like that is a dream."

"Pathetic," I said under my breath. I noticed Ankit looking at me in a very odd way. "What? Don't tell me you *love* the song too."

"Actually, I do."

"You're hopeless."

"That's your way of seeing things," he said.

I raised one of my eyebrows.

He shrugged.

"Anyway, I've got to run home quick," I said and we asked for the check. We always split the bill. Totally my idea. He never seemed very happy with the arrangement but we weren't dating or anything, so I simply couldn't let him pay for me.

I rushed home and logged into my FB account. It turned out that Ronit had attached a link to one of his photos from his Photo Album *Australia*.

I clicked on the link.

Believe me when I say, I gawked at the picture unblinkingly for two whole minutes.

It was breathtakingly spectacular.

Ronit was standing on a beach, under the glistening sunlight, with only three items on his body. One was his shoes, the laces of which were tied together, dangling comfortably from his left shoulder. The other two were all-black shades and beige shorts, worn very low. I emphasise, *very low*. Any lower and the whole purpose of wearing them in the first place would've been lost!

"One, two, three . . ." I counted up to eight. Eight pack abs! But what really caught my attention was the smile – The easy expression and the lopsided grin with that adorable dimple in just one of the cheeks. Irresistible!

I hate repeating things, but . . . *edible*! I resented the shades. I wanted . . . no, wanted would be too feeble a word. I longed, I craved to see those eyes.

I commented on that picture—

Vatsala Rathore: I'll message you my comment! :P

Ronit Oberoi: Even if it's 'You look fat', I wouldn't mind it here!

'You're funny,' I thought and sent him a Message. I liked to keep our conversations private. They felt more special that way.

Vatsala: Oh. My. Gosh.

Ronit: Was that a compliment?

Vatsala: Only most definitely!!

Ronit: Hehe! Thank you :D :D

Vatsala: The shorts could've been shorter . . . :P

They reached just below his knees.

Ronit: Point taken ;)

Vatsala: Not any lower at the waist though!! This isn't Playgirl! ;) :P

Ronit: Playgirl? I think you were too young for all that! :P :P

Vatsala: I'm not so naïve and innocent! I turn nineteen in a couple of days :)

Ronit: Oh, great! :)

So what'll be your gift from me? Shorter shorts will do?? :P :P

No, please. Spare me the *pain* . . . I like to breathe!

Vatsala: I wouldn't mind! ;)

Ronit: And what'll I get in return?

What was I supposed to say to that?

Vatsala: Whatever you say . . .

Ronit: Wear something super-short and super-hot for your b'day!! And upload pictures! ;)

Vatsala: Can't promise the short part . . . live with my family . . .

And of course, the other tiny reason – Ranchi is hardly a metro!

Ronit: Hot will do :D

Vatsala: Hehe! Sure :)

Did I just flirt a guy I barely even know? And a celebrity at that?

Sometimes, I amaze myself!

All of a sudden, searching-for-a-hot-dress became the sole purpose of my existence. Since Jaanvi was busy with Nilaap, who was in a 'crisis' (whatever that meant!), I called Nalini and Shruti. Luckily for me, Nalini knew all the right stores and could almost sniff and tell if we'd find anything decent there.

One-piece dresses were something I had no affinity towards and shopping for one was definitely a first.

Chat-8

Messed up Plans

October 5th, 2010

"How could you do this to me?" Jaanvi shrieked when I showed her the dress I'd bought the previous day.

"What did I do?" I frowned.

"I'll have to tell you that? You went to shopping without me!"

"But you were busy rescuing Nilaap from whatever crisis he was in. That's why I didn't call you."

"I just said I was busy *for the movie*. It didn't necessarily imply that I was busy for shopping too!"

"You lost me."

"Let me explain, Einstein! Nothing happened to Nilaap. I'm not saying I wasn't with him. I was. And it was so much fun. He's totally besotted by me, that's kind of obvious . . . and I think I'm falling for him too. Every time I'm with him, it's like the rest of the world doesn't even exist. And when I'm not with him—"

"So you mean you didn't come with us to spend time with him alone?" I cut her off mid-sentence. I couldn't bear to take anymore of that lovey-dovey stuff.

"Huh? What? Oh no! I meant that Nilaap wasn't having a crisis. I lied to you. I wanted you and Ankit to spend some quality time together. My idea!" she said, sounding immensely pleased with herself.

"*What?*" It was too much for me to take at once. I was really dumb when it came to all that emotional crap. It was all French to me. Or German maybe. Whichever is more difficult to understand. *Chinese*. (Mandarin, to be precise. Since 'Chinese' is not a language!)

"Yes. Ankit had already seen the movie once. He said he liked one of the songs from the soundtrack a lot. So I suggested we get four tickets, I and Nilaap back out at the last moment, you guys spend some time together and after the movie – when you are starved as you always are – he takes you to Ecstasy and arrange for that song to be played. And then he professes his love for you and you guys live happily together forever after."

"*WHAT?*" I repeated, only louder this time.

"Yeah. And although I don't think he was going to execute that last part of the plan, I did manage to convince him to at least initiate a conversation regarding that."

I didn't know what to say.

"So tell me, what happened?" she prodded. "Ankit didn't call. Neither did you. I was waiting."

It was one of those moments when someone tells you what you did unknowingly and the first thing that comes into your mind is 'Uh-oh.'

Ankit had planned on a *date* with me? He had wanted to talk about *us*? And I'd messed it up bad. *So bad*. First I invited Praveen and Evita to join us, when we were supposedly *planned* to spend some 'quality time' alone. But then the lovebirds had flown out of sight . . .

"Oh! So that's why Praveen and Evita left right after the movie . . ." I wondered aloud.

"Praveen? Evita? What're you talking about?" Jaanvi asked.

"I asked them for the movie. The tickets would've gone to waste otherwise."

"Bloody hell! Are you crazy?"

"I didn't know about your little plan!"

"Point. So what happened after the movie? Oh God, do I even want to know?"

I gave her my best dirty look. "They left. I guess Ankit made them . . ."

"That's my boy! Then he took you to Ecstasy?"

"Yes, because I was so starved, as *planned*."

She laughed. "I know you so well. If you weren't starved, by any chance, he would've suggested the place. And you *never* say no to Ecstasy!"

"Who can? It's the best ever."

"I know. So what happened next?"

"Things didn't go quite as romantically as planned. On listening to that *cheesy* song, I did not get doe-eyed and express my undying love for him . . ." I then narrated the entire incident to her, taking special care to emphasise on how her well thought-out plan hadn't exactly worked out as expected.

"You hated the song?"

"Absolutely."

"And you're telling me you rushed home to check what VJ Ron sent you in that Message, without even bothering to stay a while longer to listen to what Ankit had to say?"

"How was I supposed to know Ankit wanted to say something to me in the first place?"

"This sucks. I can't even begin to imagine how he must've felt . . ."

"Shit," I said. Everything I felt at that moment could pretty much be summarised in that one little word. Shit.

I was pretty slow when it came to the emotional crap, but this time even I had a faint inkling that it couldn't have been a memorable experience for Ankit. Or maybe it had been memorable, only for all the wrong reasons.

"Did you just have to run home? What did VJ Ron send you anyway?" He was still VJ Ron to her, while he'd become Ronit for me long ago. We knew each other.

"A half-naked photo of him," I told her.

"What? Really? You lucky bitch!"

"Actually, it wasn't exclusive or anything. He added it to his Album too."

"Which album?"
"*Australia*."
"Okay, I'll check. And tell me something. . . What if VJ Ron wasn't in the picture? What then?"
"As in?"
"I want to know your reaction to what Ankit would've said; had VJ Ron not sent you that Message."
"I don't know . . . it could've been worse than this, I guess . . ."
"How?"
"Because your plan was really shitty. You know I don't give two hoots about romantic music and heartfelt confession of true love. Love doesn't exist."
"It does."
"For some people maybe, but I ain't that *blessed*," I rolled my eyes.
"Why aren't you taking this seriously?"
"I am serious. I don't believe in that superbly overrated term love."
"So what are you doing with VJ Ron?"
"You mind calling him Ronit? VJ Ron seems so—"
"OK, Ronit. Why such double standard?"
"I don't *love* Ronit! It's just a minor crush."
"Ankit loves you. Doesn't that mean anything to you at all?"
"It does . . . but . . ."
"But what?"
"You can't force me to love him! I just don't, for reason beyond my comprehension level." I had a pea-sized brain.
"You—"
"Just close the topic."
"Okay," she agreed half-heartedly.
"So tell me. You like the dress?"
"*Love it*. Fish! I missed shopping with you. That too for a *dress*. By the way, why sudden change of style? I've never seen you wear a one-piece dress before." (Jaanvi had a problem with using the F-word. She said 'fish' instead. Or rats or pigs or duck! Don't get me wrong, she didn't have any trouble saying other swear words!)
Yes. I never used to wear dresses or skirts or other girly attires. Denims and sweatshirts pretty much defined me.
I also had a strong disliking for heels and make-up. But I couldn't have looked *hot* in clothes that I preferred wearing. And I just had to look *hot* for Ronit. I didn't tell Jaanvi this, though.
"We're celebrating in a club and all . . . so I thought I'd dress up for a change."
"Great." She rubbed her palms together, visibly excited. Then she started deciding what kind of stockings, footwear and make-up I'd be wearing the next day. And yeah, the hairstyle! How can I forget about that? She spent hours on it, face contorted in concentration, twisting my hair one way or the other. I lost count of the number of hairs I lost that day. Clips, I counted up to eleven and then lost count of them, too.
And it wasn't even my birthday that day! She was just experimenting with my hair to decide which look suited me the best. 'Rehearsing' was the term she'd used.
By the time she got her 'perfect look' I had developed a slight sprain in my neck.
But for once in my life, I genuinely didn't mind. To tell the truth, I actually even enjoyed the whole session. Especially, when I looked into the mirror and saw my reflection. It felt like I might actually end up looking *hot* the next day.
It was a nice feeling.
Moments later, Jaanvi left after getting a call from Ankit. She didn't let me join her, saying she had to talk to him alone about what had happened at Ecstasy the previous day.
It wasn't that big a deal, I felt like shouting, but held myself back. I knew they were going to shop for my birthday gift and Jaanvi was just making excuses to keep me at bay.
I logged into my FB account, convincing myself that I was doing so out of sheer boredom. No other reason. Definitely not because of Ronit. Not at all.
I was living in denial.
His Status read "Ronit Oberoi thinks that we are a bunch of people accustomed to unnecessary trans fat in our diet and a paunch."
Apparently, a lot of people had been trashing him for his weight loss. Too skinny, darker than before, eyes sinking back into sockets and dimples retreating back into the cheeks . . . I didn't think so. Not after that absolutely smoking photo of his I saw just the previous day!
Not that I had any affinity to ultra slim skeleton look-alike boys. On the contrary, even the thought of ever going out with a guy whose stomach caved inwards, every bone of his ribs prominent under his T-shirt, arms sticking out like matchsticks, ready to snap at the slightest pressure and – worst part – wore his jeans extremely low on nonexistent hips . . . Yikes! Nightmare! I preferred some flesh on bones.

Don't get me wrong. I hate too many muscles, because that's so-not-sexy either. But Ronit had it perfectly balanced. He had the right amount of bones and muscles. Just like Brad Pitt! Remember Fight Club? Yum!

I posted a Comment on his Status.

Vatsala: Excessive trans fat in our diets is almost a way of Indian lifestyle!
But a paunch? We panic at the first sign of it! Definitely not accustomed to it!
<And I speak for all girls here> :P :P

Seven girls Liked that Comment. Ronit, however, did not show any sign of noticing it whatsoever. All girls were going mad, praising him like anything, debating whether they like the new Ronit or the old, trying to get his attention.

Ronit: None of the comments are in sync with the status! :P
Vatsala: Mine is!
Ronit: Oh yes, yours is :)

And that's all the 'conversation' I had with Ronit that day. Did he even remember that I was the same girl he chatted with the previous day? I have no idea.

Chat-9

Dance Floor

October 6th, 2010

I rechecked my cell phone – no new message. It was my birthday and Ronit hadn't wished me. It was almost eight in the evening and I was getting increasingly irritated. I hadn't left my cell phone for even a single second the whole day. Online, waiting . . .

"So, how's Buttons?" Jaanvi asked as she came to sit next to me on the windowpane.

"Buttons?" I asked.

"Your cell phone! You've spent all day with it, didn't think it was humane to name him? How mean!"

"Very funny." I-phones don't even have *buttons*.

"Oh come on! It's your birthday. We're supposed to be having fun."

"But he still hasn't wished me."

"So what? Your best friends are with you and everyone else is already at the club waiting for you. Does that mean nothing to you now?" she asked angrily.

"Of course it does! Still . . ."

"Whatever. I was really looking forward to this treat and I'm not going to miss it. I'm off," she announced and left.

"Someone's real pissed off," Ankit observed, entering my room.

"Sure I'm pissed. She left for *my* birthday treat without *me*!"

"Actually, I was referring to her. She seems really pissed at you," Ankit said, looking very amused.

"But she left!"

"No, she didn't. She's waiting for you outside. You really thought she left?"

"I hoped not."

"So let's go."

I looked down at my phone, "Yes, we should. Before she leaves for real!"

"You know, there are still four hours left. He'll send a Message."

"Hmmm . . ."

"Anyway, I wanted to give you something," he said, producing a wrapped package; my birthday gift! I tore it open to reveal a collection of all the movies Brad Pitt has ever worked in. *All of them!*

I hugged him tightly shrieking, "You're the best best best friend anyone can ever get!" This is what I liked about Ankit the most – he never forced his choices on me. He gifted me movies of my favourite actor and did not try to make me like his favourite, who happened to be Leonardo DiCaprio (who is equally stunning, by the way. But I don't fall in love with everyone!).

As I looked at Ankit at that moment and met his eyes, I felt a strange . . . something. I didn't know what it was, couldn't quite put

a finger on it . . . I opened my mouth to say something but for the first time in my life, words failed me.

"Shall we?" he said and the moment passed.

"Yeah, let's go."

"And just by the way . . ."

"What?" I asked.

"You look stunning. I mean *literally*."

"I thought you'll never say." *Why was I blushing?*

"I thought you weren't in a mood to listen."

"You could've changed my mood."

"Guess I did just that!" He puffed his chest out, proud of himself.

"Yeah yeah," I punched his arm.

"Cute way you have of expressing yourself!"

"Don't. Ever. Call. Me. Cute."

"Yeah yeah," he mimicked me.

"You know what I like about birthdays the most?" I asked as we left for the club together.

"Gifts!" Ankit and Jaanvi said in unison.

"Guilty," I grinned.

Despite the way it started, the evening went pretty well. Once at the club, everyone praised how I looked. Even Evita, who always raised eyebrows at my slightly tomboyish wardrobe, liked my new look. Although all I got from her was, *purple suits you,* I decided to take that as a compliment; coming from Evita, it was *huge*. The best I could hope for.

"Care to dance?" Jaanvi asked Ankit.

"Sure," he replied and turned to me. "Let's go," he held my arm and the three of us made our way to the dance floor. We were soon joined by Praveen, Evita, Nilaap, Nalini, Shruti and Viyali.

Sad for me, I had to excuse myself after the first few songs to leave the dance floor and sit on the couch we had reserved.

So I ain't much of a dancer. Big deal. Why are all girls expected to dance well anyway? There wasn't an extra hormone or something that made us great at dancing. And to add to the issue, most girls actually were great dancers.

And to make the matter even worse, Jaanvi and Ankit were both *amazing* dancers. And they made an awesome pair. They put the term *setting the dance floor on fire* to shame! They'd won every single dance competition at college and inter-college levels held in the past two years. They should audition for Dance India Dance or the like, I kept telling them. They thought I was just being kind. I wasn't. They were fantastic dancers. I wasn't.

All the steps I knew, when taken together, could save my grace for two songs. Three tops. So I satisfied myself with sitting on the couch and drinking my mocktail, trying to drown myself in my misery.

Though alcohol had always fascinated me, I'd never tasted it; going home after having a drink wasn't a thought I cherished. Not even a sip. I respected my mother too much to do that.

My time will come. Once I'm out of home and into a hostel . . . you just wait!

Watching Ankit and Jaanvi dance together stirred something within me. Was it envy? Why would it be? I didn't have a reason to be jealous. Jaanvi was quite clearly taken in by Nilaap, who returned her feelings with interest.

And Ankit . . . he loved *me*. Or at least claimed to do so. So why on earth was I jealous?

He joined me after another two songs.

"You didn't have to come for me," I said, although I appreciated his thoughtfulness.

"Come on, I couldn't leave you alone at your own birthday treat. And anyway, I wanted to give Jaanvi some private time with Nilaap. She said she was done trying to make him jealous."

We laughed and looked at the pair. Something was definitely brewing there.

Next day, I got a reply from Ronit, to the Message I'd sent him the previous night.

> Vatsala: It's my birthday. A wish wouldn't hurt!
>
> Ronit: Hey! Was travelling man!
>
> I hope you had a great day. Upload pictures :)

Yeah, whatever, I thought. Who calls a girl 'man' anyway? And he really thinks I'll upload my photos on FB just because he asked me to? Huh! Keep dreaming!

And till this day, the photos from my nineteenth birthday haven't seen the face of Facebook.

Chat-10

Blues

October 16th, 2010

I didn't contact Ronit for full nine days. No Chat, no Message, no Comment . . . not even a Poke. I was kind of proud of myself; it felt like I'd set a record or something.

But it didn't seem to affect Ronit in the least. It was like he wasn't even aware that a certain Vatsala existed.

It might've been true too, but I refused to accept the chances of it being so. It wasn't like I didn't have any effect on his life whatsoever. I did.

Or so I liked to think.

I preferred being happy living a lie than accepting the bitter reality and hurt.

I put my ego aside (which wasn't very easy, if you're talking about me; I had HUGE self-esteem issues) and posted a Comment at one of his Photos, hoping he'd notice. He didn't.

I posted another.

> Vatsala: Go on . . . Keep ignoring me . . .
>
> Ronit: Oh, I am so not!

He had been. After I'd posted my first Comment, three other people had too and he had replied to each one of them. He just didn't reply to my Comment. And he said he wasn't ignoring me. Who was he kidding?

The worst thing when you Comment somewhere is that whenever someone else posts a Comment after you, you get a Notification.

And when it's Ronit's Photo, a lot of people Comment. And you get a lot of Notifications.

As I told you before, there weren't many photos of Ronit I didn't Comment on, so you can imagine the number of Notifications I received everyday.

In the photo I'm referring to, Ronit was covered head to toe. The weather seemed quite cold wherever he was (in the Photo). The only visible part of his body was his eyes. And someone had actually complimented him on that picture, saying he looked good.

I was angry at Ronit, but I don't have any justification for posting this Comment:

> Vatsala: See? People think you're looking good . . .
> I mean, how much of you is even VISIBLE!
> Lesser you expose, better you look!
> Cool :P

I'd added that emoticon as an afterthought, so that I do not sound rude.

As expected, Ronit ignored my Comment. Nitish, (the guy who had said Ronit looked good in that Photo) however, could not ignore it.

I had a huge fight with him. *Huge*. At least fifty Comments long, I am sure. By the end of which, he had started using slangs. If he had expected me to do the same, I disappointed him big time. I replied to his long, disturbed, explicit comments with my short, stupid ones like "Whoa!", "You write well, should be a writer" and "Easy girl! You're getting all hyper." This infuriated him even more, especially when I called him a girl. His Comments got longer and contained larger number of slangs than before.

And where was Ronit all this while? I'm clueless. But he did delete all the Comments by the time Nitish got really hyper and I got really bored.

Nitish didn't leave me alone, however. He started sending me Messages. And Friend Request. Maybe he liked fighting with me; I could come up with no other reason to justify the Friend Request he sent me.

I had to Block him too.

Picking up a fight with a stranger and being mean to him didn't help me vent the anger I felt for Ronit. Facebook was useless. I logged out.

I was bored. I digged into the meagre amount of chocolates I'd received on my birthday. They lasted this long only because Maa had hidden them from me and forgotten where. *She thinks I eat too much . . .* Ahem.

Let me explain why I received a meagre quantity of chocolates – you see, there was an unwritten rule – whenever you gift something to a girl, you accompany it with goodies like chocolates, candies, flowers, cards, soft toys and stuff like that. The rule didn't apply in my case. Not because I felt it was tacky or anything, *everyone just assumed so*.

This was one cheesy thing I didn't mind. But I couldn't really blame people for assuming so. This one attribute of mine was completely in contrast with my character. Except for the stuffed animals (eww!), I adored every other item on the list.

Chocolates and candies, because I'm such a foodie. Cards, for reasons above me. And flowers, because they're beautiful and I simply love them.

But – pathetic as it may seem – I'd never received flowers from anyone in my entire life. Not that my life was over yet . . . but in all the nineteen years of my existence . . . not a single bud.

As more depressing thoughts threatened to cloud my mood, which was already dipping at the lowest point possible, I packed up those chocolates, started my Scooty Pep and got to Jaanvi's place.

"Hey," she greeted as she let me in.

"In a mood to get fat?" I waved the chocolates in front of her.

"Sure," she said. She wouldn't get fat, those extra calories would be taken care of by all the dancing she did.

I might. I didn't – or rather couldn't – dance.

But chocolates were more important. And we're talking about Ferrero Rocher and Toblerone here. That's the kind of chocolates you receive when it's your birthday. Bless Ankit's soul, oh the power above!

We attacked them.

My mood lifted considerably after all that chocolate-hogging.

Chat-11

Drunk

October 17th, 2010

Dusshera. I logged into my FB account before going to sleep. I noticed Ronit was online, but I ignored him purposefully. This time, my ego was right there, sitting next to me. Big and fat.

He started the Chat that day.

Ronit: The lesser I expose, the better I look, eh?

Oh! You remember me. Am I supposed to feel privileged?

Vatsala: Not really.

I use one full stop in Chats only when I don't want to continue the conversation.

Ronit: Hey, you didn't upload your photos?

He remembers? I was flattered, but still angry. And anyway, he didn't upload his either.

Vatsala: No, I didn't.

Ronit: Denied me an eye candy :(

Okay, now I was really flattered. I changed the topic.

Vatsala: :) Happy Dusshera, BTW! :)

Ronit: Same to you :)

Vatsala: Don't you miss India? During festivals and all?

Ronit: Actually I'm pretty content at the moment.

Just got back from the bar!

Vatsala: OH! What time is it there?

Ronit: 2:30 a.m.

Vatsala: :)

I couldn't think of anything to say.

Ronit: I'm so drunk right now! Wanna take advantage??

Vatsala: AHA!! I just wish you were here!

Ronit: Let's just assume I AM THERE WITH YOU!

Now tell me, what would you do?! ;) ;)

Vatsala: Gosh! You're drunk, I'm not!! :P :P

Oh my god! Oh my god! OH MY GOD!

Ronit: Guess I'm just unlucky :(

What are you thinking, Vatsala? Do something . . . he's drunk. When are you going to get such an opportunity again? At least ask him something you'd never ask if he's sober!

Vatsala: Are you committed?

Ronit: Not at this second :D :D

I really wasn't sure what that meant! Not right now, in the middle of the night? Not this weekend? Or not generally?

Vatsala: Have you ever been in love? Like truly and madly??

Ronit: BLAH!

Vatsala: Hahaha :D I thought I'd pry some info out of you. Letting such an opportunity go . . .

Such a waste!! ;) :P

Ronit: You wish! :P

After I'd made it sure that I was interested in taking 'advantage' of him, he seemed to have gotten in a mood to be taken

advantage of too. He sent me some – shall we say, *ill-equipped* Messages.

Vatsala: You sent me a message?
Ronit: Yup :D :D

Why was he so happy? Weirdo!

Vatsala: It had a subject saying 'hey' . . . No body??
Ronit: What? I attached something . . .
Vatsala: There isn't anything . . . :(
Ronit: Wait . . .

He sent me another Message.

Ronit: Now??
Vatsala: This time, the subject says 'hi' . . . STILL NO BODY . . .
Ronit: FB's acting up, I guess!
Vatsala: Oh hell! I won't be able to catch you drunk again! :(:(
Ronit: Hehe! :P :P
Vatsala: Has leejiye! You're the celeb . . . you won't know . . .

I don't know what's with mothers! What's wrong with chatting at midnight? How does it make any difference?

Vatsala: Hate to say . . .
Ronit: What?
Vatsala: g2g :(
Ronit: Shit! Anyway, catch you later! :)
Vatsala: Maa is really flipping out . . .
Ronit: So go!
Vatsala: Bye :)

Aargh! This was by far my longest conversation with Ronit and I had to end it because of my mother. Dusshera, family time. I'd spent the whole day with family. How could it hurt anyone if I spent some time chatting to someone non-family for a change? Moms, I tell you!

I never got to know what the 'something' that Ronit was trying to attach to the Messages was.

I was *devastated*.

’’’

October 18th, 2010

When I recounted the Chat to Jaanvi and Ankit, they were both unusually quiet. While Jaanvi did enter appropriate adjectives in between and made proper noises at certain places, I noticed that Ankit was strangely mute.

I met Jaanvi's eyes and raised my eyebrows questioningly, to which she thrust out her lower lip to suggest I-have-no-idea.

We soon got to know. To be precise, when I got to the part where Ronit had started sending me those ill-equipped Messages. At that point, Ankit said just four words before standing up and leaving.

"Just stop it, okay?"

He was gone before I could register what he meant by 'it' and react. Actually, stupid that I was, I didn't understand what he meant *at all*. Jaanvi had to explain it to me.

"What was that?" I wondered aloud.

"This must be so hard for him . . ."

"What are you talking about?"

"You singing praises of Ronit all the time. Why did you have to tell him the entire conversation you had with Ronit?"

"I tell him everything," I said simply.

"Then would you be kind enough to keep your nonsensical blabbering to yourself just where Ronit is concerned?"

"Why are you getting so hyper?" I had nothing better to say.

"Because he's hurt. You're hurting him."

"I don't mean to!" I tried defending myself.

"Doesn't matter what your intentions are; rotten or pure. Bottom line is that *he is hurt*. I cannot let that continue. So you, ma'am, will you keep your *colourful love life* to yourself and let the poor guy be?"

"But—"

"I don't want to listen," she cut me off, stomped her foot and stormed off. Told you; her trademark!

I didn't brood over that incident too much. All I did was asking myself one simple question and made my decision accordingly. *Who was more important?* Ankit or Ronit?

Ankit, who had stayed with me no matter what, put up with all the crazy tantrums I threw, endured the brunt of my anger even when he wasn't the one to be blamed, lent an ear and listened to all my useless tattle and still cared about me so much and loved me like crazy?

Or Ronit? Hey, wait . . . who was Ronit, again? Some random celebrity who sometimes replied to my messages and who was interesting to chat with and provided me with some stimulating conversations?

I didn't even take outward appearances into account. Well, actually, I did!

Ankit had looks that could kill. Ronit might have dimples to die for and that perfectly trimmed body . . . but then, I hadn't seen Ankit's body, had I? With all that dancing he did and sports he played, I wouldn't be surprised if he someday revealed some solid packs from beneath his Tees.

The choice was pretty easy. Compared to Ankit, Ronit didn't stand a chance.

Chapter Ronit closed.

Easier said than done.

Chat-12

Champagne

October 29th, 2010

It went smoothly in the beginning, but as the days went by, staying away from Ronit got more and more difficult. I'd started missing him.

I had spent so much time checking out his Profile in the last two months that it had become almost a habit for me.

But who said I couldn't check out his Profile now? I could do that anytime and as many times as I wanted without anyone being any wiser.

This was a big advantage of Facebook over Orkut (amongst a *million* others!). In Orkut, if you visit someone's Profile, he gets to know about it. Not in Facebook. Here, you can visit someone's Profile as many times as you wished without anyone getting any wiser.

But I had other reasons for not visiting Ronit's profile. I knew that if I did, I was bound to come across things (Status, Wall Posts, Quizzes, Photos, et al) that'd make me want to Comment. And if something even mildly interesting happened after that, I won't be able to shut up about it. I'll tell Ankit and . . .

So I kept away from the temptation.

Then, on the eleventh morning, the temptation was just too much to take anymore. I *had to* send him a Message.

Reason? He Liked my photos. Are you listening? *He Liked my photos!* Four of them! I was positively elated.

"I mean, Ronit Oberoi himself visited my Profile, checked out my Photos Albums, went through my Photos and Liked four of them. Isn't that insane?" I shouted when I met Jaanvi at college that day.

"Ronit Oberoi *himself*?" she repeated with a super bored expression on her face.

"Yes! This is *huge*!" I tried to make her understand.

"But *himself*? You use that term when you refer to a superstar, like *The King Khan Shahrukh himself*. But Ronit? Really?"

"Whatever. You're just jealous." I knew she wasn't. But the gravity of the situation didn't seem to hit her at all. *What's with her?*

"As if!"

But soon the class started and we dropped the topic.

It was a Thursday, which meant we had a PD (Personality Development) class. Our college had this policy – every Thursday, we had a two hour long seminar to hone our conversational skills, English language usage and for the development of our personalities. Expert professionals were invited to take guest lectures and help us build our confidence by interactive sessions in a comfortable yet world-class environment.

It was all bullshit.

We bunked all PD classes as an unspoken rule. The so-called expert professionals knew less about English than most of the students. And the active interaction constituted of them targeting weaker students from the lot and grilling them till they are too ashamed to attend college again, let alone the seminars. What kind of sadistic approach was that? Kicking someone to the ground to make themselves look taller and all-knowing, confident, powerful professionals with personalities to envy!

Though they had never had the chance to target us, I, Jaanvi and Ankit had decided after the second seminar we'd attended that that was the last we'd ever attend. Those PD people really got on our nerves.

On that day, while the seminar was being conducted, we were *networking* on a social networking site. Do I even have to mention its name?

Sure, we weren't allowed to use Facebook on our college computer labs and measures had been taken to see to it. But then, what are proxy sites for?

And the lab attendant? I can't tell you how understanding he was about all this. Helping us bunk, letting us bypass the security block and connect Facebook . . . he was a gem. Hundred bucks a month and he'd promptly risk his job for you! Don't we just love bribery? It has become a fundamental element of Indian lifestyle.

Ankit and I took seats opposite each other. Jaanvi wasn't there. She was bunking, alright, but not with us. With Nilaap. Something was cooking. I could smell it.

As soon as I logged into my FB account, I sent Ronit a Message – my first in eleven days.

Vatsala: Thanks :D
Ronit: Pleasure!

Is he online all day all night long? Doesn't he ever sleep? Is he a vampire? WOW! Just like my Edward!

He never took more than a few minutes to reply. When he did care to reply, that is!

Sometime later, something came up on my Homepage that made my mouth pop open in disbelief. Were my eyes playing tricks with me? Or my brain . . . was it working properly? Wait, did I even *have* a brain?

Ankit Rai commented on Ronit Oberoi's photo.

Ankit: Magnificence beyond imagination . . .
Vatsala: @Ankit – LMAO!! Unbelievable :))
Ankit: @Vatsala – That was for the background . . .
Vatsala: I figured ;) You'd probably prefer dying than . . . <you know what I mean> :P
Ankit: Yeah, of course . . .
Vatsala: You have major attitude adjustment issues, you know?! :D
Ankit: Actually, I don't like fake comments . . . :)
Vatsala: Aa-haan. I hear you! ;)

He leant sideways so I could see him. I winked, he made a face and we went back to our computers.

Avi sent me a Message.

Abhimanyu: Come online . . .
Vatsala: I am online! Duh!
Abhimanyu: On chat!!
Vatsala: Oh . . . see you at Gtalk!

In the name of operating system, my college computers had Windows XP installed. We were living in ancient times! And that also meant that I couldn't chat on FB chat box.

I signed into Gmail.

Abhimanyu: Champagne??
Vatsala: Huh?
Abhimanyu: Your status . . .
Vatsala: Oh, yeah!
Abhimanyu: What does it mean?
Vatsala: Girl thing :P
Abhimanyu: Shudup! Tell me . . .
Vatsala: Arey, there was this 'secret message' between girls . . .
Each drink represented her relationship status . . .
Abhimanyu: And champagne means?
Vatsala: That I have a huge crush!
Abhimanyu: Who's he?

Boys! And brothers, at that! Oh, I forgot to tell you – Abhimanyu aka Avi is my cousin. Just forty-two days older to me but a typical *big brother*. And it just happened to be that his hobby was making life hell for me!

Vatsala: You'll never know!!
Abhimanyu: Oh really? How about I let your mom know about that CARDS thing . . .
Vatsala: NO FREAKING WAY!
Abhimanyu: Then tell me . . .
Vatsala: Ronit Oberoi
Abhimanyu: Who's he? Classmate?

Are you kidding me? How come no one knows him?

Vatsala: A VJ and an actor!
Abhimanyu: OH!! Never heard of him!!! :P
Vatsala: Been living under a rock?
Abhimanyu: Look who's all worked up! :P :P
Vatsala: Whatever.
Abhimanyu: Hehe! :D How d'you know him?
Vatsala: Facebook
Abhimanyu: Really . . . your taste in men is deteriorating!!
Vatsala: How can you say that? You don't even know him!
Abhimanyu: Exactly my point! Your level has dropped from Pitt to EMRAAN HASHMI! ;)
Now even lower! Progress!! :D :P

Yes, I once had a crush on Emraan Hashmi. I don't want to talk about it.

Vatsala: Ronit's awesome.
Abhimanyu: We'll see . . . I'm adding him. He has about 3500 friends . . . He'll add me! :P
Vatsala: You sent him a request? Already?
Abhimanyu: Yup :D :D
Vatsala: I HATE YOU!!
Abhimanyu: I love you too, sistah!! ;) ;)

Avi adding Ronit meant he'd get to know everything that happened between me and Ronit.

The thought wasn't immensely pleasing.

Chat-13

Change of Plans

November 1st, 2010

I had just reached the main road when I spotted it. It wasn't too hard to spot, really. You have to be blind to miss such a . . . *creation*.

Porsche Cayenne.

'Car' seemed too insignificant – almost worthless – word. It is by far the most beautiful thing I've ever laid my eyes on. On second thoughts, the second most beautiful thing. The first? We'll get to that later in the story.

I forgot all about college and followed the scarlet beast all around the city. My poor scooty, which looked *so* insignificant in contrast, touched its top speed that day. Twenty minutes later, we reached the outskirts of Ranchi and going any further would've meant having a hard time coming back. I suck at remembering roads. I'm a girl, after all!

The fuel metre also showed the arm dipping dangerously towards E (the empty sign). I stopped and looked at the *car* till it became a speck, patted my scooty and made my way into the city.

"Did Dhoni buy a Cayenne?" I asked as soon as I reached college.

"Where were you? We've been calling you since the last hour," Ankit said.

"Oh, my cell phone was in my bag, which was kept in the under seat—"

"Why are you so late?" Jaanvi cut in.

"Was following a Porsche," I told them.

"What?" They echoed.

People in Ranchi aren't used to seeing big cars everyday on roads. We were just starting to accept that the crowd there was getting richer and buying Mercs and BMWs, but after Dhoni got all famous and rich, his Hummer could be spotted everywhere around the area. Porsche? Definitely a first.

Jaanvi's family was rich too. Filthy rich. You know how it is with *Marwadi* (business-class) families in Ranchi. But hers was a nuclear family, as opposed to the joint-families *Marwadis* usually have. They had four cars, one for each family member. But Porsche was out of reach even for them.

"What model?" Ankit asked.

"Cayenne Turbo S."

"You even know what kind of Cayenne it was?" This was from Jaanvi.

"Yeah," I shrugged as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Of course," Ankit seconded.

I had first subscribed TopGear the year I turned thirteen. Since then, the renewal of its subscription has been one of the most

important tasks I do every year. Probably *the* most important. The collection I have by now is worth a small fortune, my most prized possession. My collection of letters written in blood comes to a second. Oh, yes! I have a collection of that too. You see, it's a trend – almost a status statement – in Ranchi schools to write letters in blood to your girlfriends/boyfriends.

Yes, plural. People here change their 'love' with clothes. Long term relationship? Lasts all week.

Girls cut the skin of their arms to get blood and boys mostly just received such letters. The whole blood thing wasn't their cup of tea in majority of the cases, I think. In my school, girls used to wear wristbands not because they played some sport and not even for fashion, but to cover their scarred wrists. Although for girls who had strict families, cutting visible areas of body wasn't an option, upper thighs were their source of blood.

So where do I fit in? No. I've never done such a thing. Hell, I've never even had a boyfriend. Who would want to date me? But I did receive two such letters and I've stashed them away carefully in my precious collection. All I did was ask my friends, girl or boy, to give me the letters they had once they're done with. (Read – once they break up with that particular boy/girl). And they'd been only too happy to oblige. You would be surprised to know how many of them handed me over their letters even before their break-ups. Giving those letters is a ritual, but once they're given, they have no value. Everyone gets to know that A gave B a letter written in blood, end of story. *Who cared about the stupid letter anymore?*

I did. They fascinated me, still do. I've got forty-three of them.

I often wondered that if they go to such *pains* to write it, can't they watch their handwriting a bit? And *spelling mistakes*? Good grief!

"What colour?" Jaanvi was interested.

"Red. Scarlet."

"It must have been beautiful," Shruti said.

"Obviously Shruti. It's a Porsche! What do you expect?" someone piped in. I didn't know her name, but just knew that she was in my batch. Maanvi or Maansi? I noticed that she said Sruti, not Shruti. Several people have that problem in my state, Jharkhand. 'S' becomes 'sh' and vice versa. Some people called me 'Vatshala'. I don't want to comment on how I feel about that.

"Wow! You got to see it, you lucky bitch!" someone else said. Purvi /Purva? Using cuss words in public is cool. People think you're tough. *Blah.*

"Must be costlier than BMW, na?" Maanvi/Maansi asked no one in particular. She was comparing one model of Porsche to a whole brand of cars. BMW is the new Mercedes. Remember older Hindi movies, in which foreign cars were synonymous to Mercedes? Now people have moved on to BMW. *Easier to Pronounce.* (Mercy – Deej!)

"So you think its Dhoni? Did he buy it?" I asked Ankit. Shit! I'd been so captivated with the car itself that I didn't spare a second to notice who was inside it! And Dhoni had a Hummer already. But you never know! The guy was earning big money! Did you know – when he takes a ride on his Harley, two Scorpios lead him and other two follow, loaded with first notch security? How posh is that?

"Maybe. I didn't know he was in the city," Ankit wondered.

"Mahi is here? Oh my God!" Maanvi/Maansi shouted and left with Purvi/Purva, who looked equally excited with the news. News? We were just wondering, it was not supposed to be passed as real 'news'. But if that meant getting rid of Maanvi/Maansi and Purvi /Purva, we were glad.

"You think they went to *Mahi*'s place?" Jaanvi asked emphasising on Mahi.

"Couldn't care less," I laughed. People in Dhoni's hometown call him Mahi, not out of love for him but for the sole reason that it made them seem like they're his relatives or at least know him personally.

But what ruled my mind at the moment was the Cayenne. The car defined beauty.

It left an impact on me.

I wanted one too.

"I want to become a VJ." I announced later in the evening.

"What?" Ankit and Jaanvi said in unison. Were they twins? How can they say the exact same thing at the exact same time? *Always?*

"I'm serious. I want to be a VJ," I repeated.

"Do you know what date it is? 1st of November. We have CAT on 28th!" Ankit said. Taking CAT on 28th was my idea; it was the last day. *More time to prepare.* Not that I had even started preparing till then. Reading newspapers doesn't count as *real* preparation!

"I'm not taking CAT anymore, I've decided."

"What do you mean you've decided? Just like that? What are you going to do instead?" Jaanvi asked.

"I don't know. Ronit was an RJ before he—"

"Ronit? You think your VJ Ron will . . ." Jaanvi seemed very angry. She loses her ability to deliver full sentences whenever she gets too upset. "Are you . . . what the hell!" Jaanvi out! That meant one rival down, one more to go.

"I've sent him a Message . . ." I turned to Ankit.

"Saying what?" he asked.

"Just asking if he could help—"

"Help? You think he'll *help* you become a VJ? Do you seriously believe that?"

"I just asked him what to do . . . as in . . . where do I start? That kind of help. I'm not asking him to get me a job! I'll do that

myself."

"And how do you plan on doing it?" he challenged.

He's getting hyper. Do something. I made my best lost puppy face and said in a low, scared tone, "I don't know yet."

His expression changed almost instantaneously. It worked. I'm a genius! He released a breath and asked, "Has he replied?"

"No. I sent him the Message just now. He usually takes at least a couple of hours to reply," I lied. He takes minutes to reply. Sometimes even seconds.

He nodded. "Are you serious this time? Or is it like the last time, when you wanted to be a singer?"

"I'm very sure about this," I said with conviction. Wanting to become a singer is normal, isn't it? Everyone feels that way at least once in their lifetime. And music is really important, almost *vital* for me. And I know I'm a good singer. (Though no one agrees with me on that. Whatever. They're just jealous!)

"You do know you won't be able to buy a Porsche by doing this, don't you?"

"Of course I know." That'll come later. One step at a time.

The cross-questioning went for around half an hour. Ankit put all the pros and cons of it on the table. How did he know so much about life in Mumbai and life as a VJ or RJ? Just like he knew about everything in the world, and even outside, you know, galaxy, universe, Milky Way. Or is the sequence universe, galaxy, Milky Way? I'm bad at geography! Ankit was educated. I wasn't illiterate either, but education to me had an entirely different and rather simple definition – *passing the tests.*

Ankit saw the world differently. He paid attention to things. Don't get me wrong, he wasn't a nerd. Far from it. But he was gifted. If we both study for two hours before a test, I'll score passing marks and he'll actually *score*. He might even top, for all I know. Sometimes I thought he purposefully answered some questions wrong to score a bit lesser and make me feel better.

"Actually, to tell the truth . . ." Jaanvi had regained her power of speech.

"What?" Ankit asked.

"I think Vatsala is right. When I think of it, after the initial shock wore off . . . I think she's meant for the job," Jaanvi said.

I smiled. That was the best thing Jaanvi had ever said to me. I wanted to hug her tight, but resisted. Overreactions could ruin my chances.

"How?" Ankit asked.

"She's young and good-looking, not to mention ambitious. Though her ambitions have taken a wild turn! Still, her sense of humour, carefree attitude and chirpy nature certainly add to her points," Jaanvi said.

Chirpy? I didn't have a chirpy nature, I wanted to debate but maintained silence. Teamed with all the other compliments she gave me, I was overwhelmed. I wished she would go on . . . Some more praises won't hurt!

Ankit and Jaanvi totally ignored me after that. They discussed me for an entire hour, never paying any heed to the fact that I was in the same room. It was as if I was invisible. They played Mom and Dad and I, their spoilt teenaged daughter, whom they were trying to protect from the evil ways of the world!

I sat there all the while listening to them consider all possible faces of the matter and wondered how their minds work. How do intelligent people think? How can they come up with another question so quickly, based upon the answer the other person has given to their previous question? Whenever they argued, I wondered how could someone speak and listen at the same time. And how could they jump from one topic to another so swiftly?

I could probably do all the things mentioned above too. But I was getting bored and had nothing better to think. And also, I liked to pretend that I was dumb.

I know I'm weird!

The discussion ended with a final decision everyone agreed on. I will become a VJ, it was decided.

Ronit hadn't replied till the time I went to sleep. What kind of a person is he? He's almost always available to talk about all kinds of rubbish in the world, but when it came to something as important as my career, he's not bothering to reply. I sent another Message.

Vatsala: This is important to me, Please help!

Ronit: You can do whatever you wish. Take any route. There are many!

Okay, so that Message was totally useless. I said thanks anyway. Just to be polite.

Chat-14

Almost Gay

November 4th, 2010

"No way! You're kidding me," I said to Jaanvi. It was a Thursday afternoon. The staff at college was made 'aware' that the PD class was attended by very few students, so the security was tight – meaning no more bunking of classes. We bunked college altogether.

"Why would I lie about it?" she asked. "It was so amazing. I had no idea. I was just happy being with him and then he took me to

this place . . . it was beautiful . . . and he said he loved me . . .
and gave me Sugar!"

Sugar was an ugly looking pink-coloured half teddy, half dog. To me, it looked like a pig. Pink . . . the most hideous shade of pink at that—the kind of colour that hurts your eyes if you're stupid enough to look at it for more than three seconds. It was positively hideous, with all that fur and shiny surface, scary eyes and *huge* belly. How could someone buy such a thing, let alone gift it? And she actually liked it? Hell! Why would anybody make such a thing in the first place?

"Isn't it cute?" Jaanvi asked.

"You don't honestly want to know my take on it. Ignorance is bliss."

"There is something seriously wrong with you, you know?"

I cast a glance at Sugar. "Normal people like that thing?"

"Whatever," she shook her head in a way that screamed just-wait-till-your-time-comes.

"So how does it feel?" I asked.

"To be committed? It feels awesome. It's the best feeling in the world. Just to know he's always there for me, will always love me no matter what . . . and he's such a nice person . . . loving, caring . . ." She went on like that. And I wondered if it was the same Nilaap she was talking about. I mean, I knew him too and he seemed okay, but I couldn't imagine him as the person Jaanvi was so lovingly describing.

Thankfully for me, Nilaap called her moments later. She received the call, winked at me and found a seat at one of the corners of the room, sat there and talked for three whole hours.

My room isn't very big at all, but I still couldn't make out a single word of whatever she was saying from where I was lying face down on my bed.

I've observed that when in 'love' people go through some changes . . . mutations. They learn the art of whispering loud enough for their girl/boy to hear, but no one else. They can talk continuously for hours, without needing to eat, drink or pee. Conversations like 'What did you eat today?' become immensely interesting. So do the corners of every kind – room, balcony, terrace . . . People feel like every other song is written with them in mind and every other movie depicts their story. All movies are then watched in theatres, let Torrentz rot!

Weird world, I thought and drifted into slumber. There's no better use of time than sleeping. Wasting time on phone stood nowhere even close.

"Hey, congrats," I woke up to the sound of Ankit's voice.

"Thanks," Jaanvi mouthed. She was still on the phone.

I sat up on the bed and rubbed my eyes. "Hey."

"You're not wearing those *adorable* shorts you sleep in?" Ankit commented. He must have noticed it on the morning of the small dragon fiasco. I had been wondering why he didn't pursue the matter at that time.

"They are for nights and they *are* adorable."

"That's what I said."

"As if I don't understand sarcasm." So what if I buy shorts from Rbk's men's department? I love them and they are comfortable.

"In a mood to go out?" he asked.

"Naah. Let's watch some movie. Troy." I decided.

"Again?"

"You've a better idea?" I challenged. I mean, come on! Achilles, Prince Hector and Prince Paris *together*. Who can ever get enough?

"Sadly, no."

"Maa, I'm hungry," I shouted and we were served my mother's speciality, *pyaz ke bhajiye*, moments later. I and Ankit watched Troy for the zillionth time that day. Jaanvi was too busy to join us.

Later that night, Ronit added another Photo on FB. It was a picture of him from a few years back; fuller face, pimples, longer hair and a goatee. 'Cute' wasn't something I was very fond of, but that's how he looked and I liked it. I have no idea what that means. I commented:

Vatsala: Aww . . . :-*

For the uninformed, :-* is an emoticon that denotes 'kiss'.

Ronit: :) :)

Abhimanyu: Ahem Ahem!!!

I called Avi up, before he could do any harm.

"How come you remembered me? Funny thing, I was just thinking about you," he greeted.

"Leave me alone please."

"What did I do?" he acted innocent.

"That Comment you posted on his picture? Rings a bell?"

"Who's 'his'?"

"You know who. Ronit."

"Oh! That Comment? He's my friend too, why can't I Comment?"

"Avi."
"Vatsala."
"Stop it. Okay?"
"Stop? I haven't even started yet. How about I write on his Wall Tagging both of you—"
"No way."
"—and saying – *My stupid little sister @Vatsala Rathore is madly in LOVE with a GAY guy, who sports a God-awful goatee and coats his lips with coloured wax, @Ronit Oberoi*!"
"Shut up! You'd do no such thing."
"I can . . ."
"You won't. And he's straight."
"Quick question – What kind of men apply lipstick? Your options – Straight or Gay."
"He didn't apply lipstick."
"Oh, he did. Take a closer look. Someone actually commented on that. And he agreed."
"He said 'Now it seems almost gay to me too.' That's not agreeing!"
"We seem to have different definitions of the term *agreeing*, don't you think?"
This went on for a while. I gave him clarifications like 'I like Ronit so much because that guy inspired me; I wanted to be like him.' He took none of that.
I stayed awake almost all night to check if he executed any of his threats. Thankfully, he didn't.
Ronit Liked three more of my Photos. Bad ones, though! I didn't send a thank you message this time around. I knew he was lying.
Avi was a pain in not-so-decent-places. He would tease me till I'm crying, bore me till I fall asleep, irritate me till I scream, provoke me till I hit him and hurt myself! But at the end of the day, I could rest assured that he'd never cause any real harm. In fact, he was someone who always looked out for me, always had my back.
He was one of the very few people I could rely on.

Chat-15

Best Friend

November 11th, 2010

I didn't understand what Ronit Oberoi wanted. Leading me on and letting me down had become kind of a habit for him. *Did he enjoy it?*
One day he's all buddy-buddy, next day I'm a stranger to him. And what was worse was that whenever I decided to cut all ties, he made a move and when someone like him makes a move, trust me, it's *hard* to hold back.
When I asked for his help relating how-to-become-a-VJ, he sent me a Message that gave information which was as vague as they come. I got angry. Three days later, he Liked three of my Photos, and I melted faster than ice cream on a hot summer day.
Then again, for the seven days following that, he didn't reply to any of my Messages. My Diwali wishes remained unacknowledged.
And then, something happened. Something bad.
Ronit Oberoi used an Application on Facebook that ranked his best friends on Facebook depending upon –
Number of words used in Comments (in Status, Posts, Notes and Photos)
Number of Likes and Comments (in Status, Posts, Notes and Photos)
Overall best friend.
I ranked second in the first category and first in the other two.
Vatsala: I am so embarrassed.
Abhinav: @Vats – really?
Vatsala: Aa-haan.
Abhinav: @Vats: What do you mean by aa? I have a full name!!
Vatsala: By 'aa-haan', I meant 'yes'. And I would really appreciate it if you refer to me as Vatsala.
I didn't understand why he was writing '@ Vats' before every Comment. It wasn't like I was having a hard time determining if the Comment was meant for me. No one else was commenting on the Post.
Abhinav: Why? Vats is so kewl! :) :D
I decided to ignore that. I didn't like nicknames. Understatement. I *loathed* nicknames. My name is Vatsala and that's how I prefer being called. Worse was, unknown people start giving you nicknames.
It was pretty easy actually – just add 's' after the first three letters. So Debashish becomes Debs, Nidhi becomes Nids, Radhika

becomes Rads and so on. It's another trait of people hailing from small towns, desperately trying to sound urbane.

Avi decided it was a good time for him to butt in. (In case you are wondering, the nickname 'Avi' is an exception to my I-hate-nicknames trait. I've known him as Avi since my birth. He's Avi for the family).

Abhimanyu: OHHH!! Vatsala Rathore is a BIG FAN :D :P
I guess I have to start taking FAN LESSONS from her!! ;) :P

Vatsala: @Avi: you are so dead :x

Abhinav: @Vats: I would love to die if you were the one killing me. :D

I stared at the comment for one whole minute. Avi responded first.

Abhimanyu: @Abhinav: Dude, she's talking to me. And trust me, STAY AWAY!

Vatsala: @Avi: You handle this. I'm off to sleep!

I couldn't sleep, though. I hadn't realised till that day that I was practically stalking Ronit. I couldn't imagine how he must feel about me. Disturbing questions started flooding my mind. Am I suffocating him? Am I looking too desperate? Have I become *clingy*?

The answers I had for those questions weren't very pleasing.

I was not that kind of a person. I didn't believe in love, didn't fall for guys, stayed away from commitments, hated flirts . . . hell, I even hated interaction with people I personally knew, let alone strangers on a website. Then why? Why was I so taken in by Ronit? Why was I so devoted to him? Why did I blindly worship the ground he walked on?

Is it love?

Have I changed? Have I become *that* kind of a person? The nice and sweet girl I was two years ago . . . Have I turned into her again? I thought she was my past and I had grown up. Was I mistaken?

I called Jaanvi and told her everything.

"What do you mean embarrassed? You did it yourself, don't you think?" she asked.

"I didn't realise . . ."

"How can you keep posting Comments all the time without realising? And that survey counted words from the Comments you posted, right? Can you imagine where you'd have ranked had they counted words from Messages and Chats, too?"

"Is there a rank higher than first?" I put down the phone feeling even lower than before. Jaanvi had become very self-centred around that time. I was self-centred too, but the radius of my self-centeredness was much larger. Nilaap did that to her. *Boyfriends do that to girls.*

My mood didn't get a chance to dip any lower. Ronit commented on that post. Finally!

Ronit: Hey, Vatsala is a friend. She deserved it! :)

Vatsala: :D

Abhimanyu: Kitni khush! :P :P

Vatsala: Shut up, Avi!

Abhimanyu: You really mean that?

Vatsala: Most definitely.

Abhimanyu: Think again. DO YOU REALLY WANT ME TO SHUT UP?

Then it hit me. Last time when he was irritating me and I asked him to 'shut up', he deleted all his Comments from our conversations. It made me look like an idiot, talking to myself on my Status, Wall Posts and Photos. And as if this was not enough, he then Posted Comments like, 'Having fun talking to yourself?', 'What's with you?' and 'Seriously, WHAT'S WITH YOU?'

This was his way of 'shutting up'. Avi is no regular guy.

Vatsala: Don't you dare!

Abhimanyu: Excuse me??

Vatsala: Fine. Let me rephrase it – PLEASE Avi, not here . . .

Abhimanyu: Now it's better. So let's talk . . . What am I getting in return?

Vatsala: Are you kidding me?

Abhimanyu: I don't like your tone, young lady!

Vatsala: Okay. I apologise. PLEASE don't.

That went on for an eternity. Or almost half an eternity.

Chat-16

Obsessed

November 15th, 2010

I didn't understand what was happening to me. The crush I'd had for Ronit had gotten from minor to major and had positively

turned into an obsession.

Earlier, I knew him as VJ Ron but as I started to get to know him as a person, it felt like I was falling in love with him. On Facebook! I mean, how crazy can someone get!?

There were times when he didn't reply to my messages. Times like those made me realise that I was being foolish. He probably doesn't even know me. Maybe he didn't even realise that he had been chatting with the same girl whenever he chatted with me.

I decided to end it before investing too much in this one-sided 'relationship'.

Vatsala: I don't know what's happening to me.

Last time I was so crazy about someone, the guy was Robert Pattinson and even that didn't last long.

I hope this blows over too. Soon.

I sent him this Message and tried to get him off my mind. My phone rang. It was Ankit.

"Hello!" I greeted.

"Hey! What are you doing?" he asked.

"Trying to do a headstand. You?"

"Trying to study," he laughed.

"Same thing."

"More or less. But I'm actually trying to do that."

"What, headstand?"

"No, study. You were the one doing the headstand, remember?"

"Trying to. But why are you studying? *Is baar top karne ka saara bojh tere naazuk kandho par hai kya?"*

"Right. As if I can top just by 'trying to study' one night!"

"One night? You're talking as if we have tests just tomorrow!"

"I really hate to be the one to break this to you, but yeah, we do have tests starting tomorrow."

"What the fuck!" I shouted. "Why on earth didn't you tell me before?"

"How was I supposed to know that you didn't know?" he defended himself.

"You could've read my mind!" Yes, I get *very* irrational when I panic.

"Will you ever come out of your fantasy world? I. Can't. Read. Minds. I'm no Edward Cullen!"

"Hey, now you're crossing lines here. Don't drag Edward into this," I warned. I know I care about all the wrong things at all the wrong times!

"Okay, whatever. Let's come back to *now*. In a mood to study?" he asked.

"When am I ever?! Oh God! I'm so screwed. Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!"

"Language, sweetie!" Really, Ankit can be pretty loony at times. I'm dying here and all he seemed to care about was my *language*!

"I'm flunking tomorrow! Stop teaching me manners!"

"What am I ever going to do with you? Now listen, do you want to fail tomorrow?"

"Hell, no! Why would I want that?" Told you, Ankit could be loony at times!

"I don't know; you're a weirdo! You want loads of things that are rather *unusual*."

Now that was below the belt. Why was he bringing *that* up? I opened my mouth to retort, "I—"

"No, let's not get into that now and 'try to study' instead," he changed the topic. See, I have that effect on people! I scare them!

"How?"

"Take out your notes, we'll study together."

"But I don't *have* any notes," I cried.

"You do. The whole class photocopied Abhay's notes. Jaanvi said she gave you your copy."

"Really? Let me see," I said and ran to check my bag. "Thanks loads! What would I do without you? You're my saviour! How can I ever thank you enough?" Exaggeration is one of the highlights of my character, an innate trait!

"How about shutting up?" he said. But he sounded quite pleased.

I zipped it. And four hours later, when we finally hung up the phone, we had completed three chapters. We left the other two. Who studies the full syllabus for exams? We weren't freaks!

It was two in the morning and I was so sleepy I could barely keep my eyes open. I went to shut down my laptop. There it was – Ronit's reply. *Sleep flew right out the window!*

Ronit: C'mon! Robert Pattinson?

I'm his darn driver!!! ;)

Darn? People actually used that word in real life?

I checked the time; he had sent the message about ten minutes ago. Maybe he's still awake . . . what was he doing up so early? It must be sometime around 6:30 in the morning there at Sydney. (My mind had turned into a superb international time-convertor ever since I'd started chatting with Ronit!)

Vatsala: Hey! Don't say that!

I'm in love with you, remember? Can't hear anything less than perfect about you! ;)

Ronit: What? Naah, it's just infatuation after seeing my heavily photo-shopped pictures!!! :P

Vatsala: It's not just how you look. I'm in love with everything about you.

Your eyes, your voice, your stance . . . everything . . .

He didn't reply for the next ten minutes.

Vatsala: And now I made a complete fool of myself :(

Ronit: No, you didn't!

Vatsala: Oh yes, I did. I can't imagine what you must think of me.

Falling in love with a guy on Facebook! Someone I've never even met!!

Hell, I hate what I think of myself. :(

Ronit: Stop being such a kid! You're awesome! :)

Vatsala: You're just being kind. I have never pursued someone so badly.

I didn't know it sucked so badly.

Ronit: Why does it suck so bad?

Vatsala: Because it's all one-sided. It has to be.

You have thousands of fans; you can't be attached to ALL OF THEM!

I know that, still . . . I don't know what to do . . . How to get over you . . .

Ronit: Hmm . . .

Vatsala: You're not helping here! What do I do? :x

Ronit: I don't know what to say! I've never been in such a situation before!! ;)

Vatsala: Don't tell me! No one has been so mad about you ever before?? :o

Ronit: But no one asked me for help to get her out of it!

Vatsala: Hahaha :D I guess I'm just plain crazy! :D

Ronit: :) Hey, I g2g now . . .

Vatsala: Yeah, sure :)

Thanks, BTW. I was so stressed before . . . you made my day :-*

Day? More like night. I checked my watch: 3:17 a.m. Day.

I reread the conversation and realised that I'd started talking (more like – typing) like him. Instead of full stops, I'd started using exclamatory marks after my statements. That guy was getting under my skin.

I suddenly remembered that I had to wake up early to revise for the test. Why even bother sleeping? The test started at 7:00. I couldn't comprehend why in the name of Devil would anyone schedule tests to start at such *ungodly hour*?

But then, what you can't change, accept, right? What other choice did I have, anyway? So setting up an alarm for 5:00, I went to sleep.

I didn't wake up at five, quite obviously. When the alarm rang, it felt like I had slept just minutes ago. And it is a universally accepted fact that the sleep gets immensely sweeter after the alarm rings and you turn it off!

Jaanvi had to literally drag me out of my bed to the exam hall that day! You don't need to be a brain surgeon to decode that I screwed up that test! BAD!

Chat-17

Not-so-gross

November 16th, 2010

"How was your test?" I heard Jaanvi asking Nilaap. Now *I* didn't mean anything to her, her world revolved around her new

boyfriend, I thought. But then, did she even need to ask me about my test?

"Worse than expected," Nilaap replied.

"Aww . . . poor darling," Jaanvi tried soothing him with mock baby tone. I had to fake a throat clearing to check the laughter bubbling inside me.

I didn't hover any longer anyway. I had to get home early; I was missing Ronit.

I sent him a Message as soon as I logged in.

Vatsala: Don't mind my cousin Abhimanyu. He loves making my life hell!

Ronit: Never mind!

I didn't continue the conversation because I thought it might make me look desperate.

I checked if the most recent episode of 'How I Met Your Mother' was available on Torrentz. It was. I downloaded it, changed into some comfortable clothes and watched it.

"What's for lunch, Maa?" I asked as I entered the kitchen.

"Your favourite, *bhindi ki sabji*," she answered.

"I'll serve," I offered and set the table.

"So what's going on?" she asked as we sat down to eat.

"Nothing exciting. Actually things are more boring than before, now that Jaanvi . . ." I trailed off.

"What about her?"

"Oh, nothing," I bit my tongue. Do I ever shut up?

"I know she has a boyfriend now." Maa stated matter-of-factly.

"*What?*"

"You think I'm deaf? These walls aren't that thick."

"Oh!" It was all I could say.

"So things are dull for you because Jaanvi doesn't have time for you now?"

"Kind of." I wasn't comfortable discussing this particular matter with my mother, I mean, sure I tell her about whatever goes around in college. But she didn't know those people personally. It was just some Aditi and some Vandana to her. But she knew Jaanvi. *And her parents.* I decided to keep shut.

"Pass me the rice."

"Ankit is a nice guy," she said next.

I choked. "Water."

She rubbed my back and laughed, "Relax, I'm not interfering. Just saying."

When did my mother start talking like that? When did her morals and ideals get so lenient? Was it the effect of those goddamn soap operas? Which reminded me, "What happened in 'Pavitra Rishta' last night?"

"Ah! The usual. Maanav and Archana still can't express their love . . ." She launched into detailed version of yet another episode of a TV serial in which the story is nonexistent. You can know all there is to know about the storyline, just by watching its advertisements once a week. So why did I watch it religiously every night? To spend time with Maa.

After Papa's death, we are the only people living in the house and it gets lonely. Recently, Maa had starting teaching English in primary classes at school, so mornings were taken care of. But there wasn't much to do at nights, for either of us. The work load of a primary school teacher and a BBA student isn't all that demanding.

So these were desperate measures.

And now Maa was becoming like me. That day she initiated conversation about Jaanvi's love life and Ankit. She was already addicted to Two and a Half Men by then and I swear I once heard her singing 'Love the Way You Lie' while cooking dinner. And not Rihanna's lyrics. Eminem's. True story! *Maybe she was spending too much time with me.*

Later that evening, I went to Jaanvi's place. "Guess what? I got the latest episode of HIMYM, The Playbook. It is—" I stopped when I noticed the look on her face. The phrase *starry eyes* suddenly crossed my mind. And not just figuratively, *literally.*

"Hello?" I waved my arm in front of her face. It was when I shouted her name for the third time that she focussed her starry eyes on me.

"Hey," she said. She had this odd smile on her face . . . this strange glee . . .

"Are you high on something?"

"He kissed me. It's the best kind of high. Period." She announced, as if she had experienced every kind of high there was. But that was the last thought on my mind at that moment.

Dumb as I was, all I could say was, "On the lips?"

She nodded, blushing terribly. I didn't know how I was supposed to react.

Should I be excited for her? 'On the lips? Really? How was it? Was there tongue involved? Was it gross? Did you puke?'

Or should I act all disapproving? 'On the lips? What the fuck? What were you thinking? Twelve days into a relationship and you already let him kiss you? On the lips? Are you freaking kidding me? Have you totally lost it?'

However, I was saved the ordeal to decide on an appropriate response as Jaanvi herself told me every excruciating detail of how mind-blowing her first kiss was.

"You won't believe how . . . out of the world it was. Neil was so gentle, so tender, so compassionate . . . I was so scared at first .

. .
My heart was beating out of my chest, but he put me at ease . . ."

Now, I won't pretend that I wasn't interested in knowing all about the kiss, but *compassionate*? Really? I was sure if it were me, I would've thrown up on account of such lameness – if not for the sheer grossness of the kiss itself! And I didn't miss that she was calling Nilaap 'Neil' . . . *Already into cute nicknames?* The only person I think of when I hear 'Neil' is Barney Stinson! So I phased out, just kept nodding my head, pretending to listen.

" . . . was the best kiss ever!" she finally concluded.

"Wait a minute. Ever? Exactly how many times have you kissed?" I had meant it as a taunt, hadn't expected her to actually reply to that. She did.

"Twelve."

"*Twelve*?"

"Yup. One for each day of our being together."

What the fuck! Does that mean you'd kiss thirteen times tomorrow? And what about the first eleven days? Will you make up for those 66 forgotten kisses? (I've always been good at Mathematics!) Will you kiss thirteen times tomorrow? What if you want to kiss more someday? Will you kiss 365 times on your anniversary?

Hold on . . . does that mean, "It wasn't gross?"

"Are you out of your mind? Gross? It was the most marvellous thing ever!"

By this time, she had used all possible adjectives to describe the kiss. People say, 'Even if you repeat a lie hundred times, it doesn't become the truth.' It did. I had started believing it.

And it made me think. I was forced to face the reality. Most of my friends at college were into relationships or were trying to get into one, except me.

Oh yes! I was trying to get into a relationship too, but in a virtual world, namely Facebook! All I had going in the name of a relationship was gigantic obsession for a VJ who let me have the privilege to chat with him from time to time. Sure, sometimes it was he who initiated the conversations but that didn't account to anything; maybe he had been getting bored and looking for something to pass time with when he had seen me online.

And then there was Ankit, of course. Not that I had any such feelings for him, but there was . . . *something*.

Can there be a relationship? With either of them? Did I even want to have one?

Yes, I did, I decided at that minute.

I accepted at that very moment that I'd changed. No, I hadn't turned into that 'sweet and nice' girl I once was, but my take on love had certainly gone through some major modifications.

Well, I couldn't say I believed in love, but I couldn't say I didn't believe in it either. I was hanging somewhere in between the two.

Chat-18

Perfect Liar

November 17th, 2010

Ronit's Status said he was writing a novel. Everyone knew he was a prolific blogger. And now he has decided trying his hands on an entire book? Impressive!

My exams were going on and I had no time to waste. But when I saw him online, I simply could not resist.

I sent an SMS to Ankit saying:

Vatsala: I'm running a li'l late . . . will be there in half an hour or so . . . don't start without me!
Ankit: Sure thing . .

He always used two dots after sentences. I made him, saying one full stop seemed like you want to end the conversation.

Vatsala: You're writing a book?
Ronit: Yep!
Vatsala: Like . . . a full 300 page novel??
Ronit: Around 250 pages, yeah!
Vatsala: What's it about?
Ronit: Me!
Vatsala: REALLY??
Ronit: Yes, life as an RJ, then VJ . . . now actor . . .
Vatsala: Wow! I can't wait . . .

That was a lie. VJs were trying their luck at everything. A well-known VJ, Cyrus Broacha, wrote a novel titled 'Karl, Aaj aur Kal', I once saw a copy of it at a bookstore and just by looking at the cover, I decided I'd never read such a thing. Being a VJ and a novelist together didn't seem right.

So was the case with being a VJ and an actor. Remember VJ Anusha's *Virudhh*, VJ Rannvijay's *London Dreams* and several other such failed attempts by other major or minor VJs? All their movies were big flops and they weren't appreciated for their roles in the films either!

But Ronit was different. His movie would be a huge blockbuster and novel a huge bestseller, I was very sure.

Ronit: That's nice to know :)

Vatsala: What genre?

Ronit: This one's a love/lust story . . . about me, I told you

Vatsala: Hmmm . . .

Love/lust? Was that a genre? Gosh! What is India reading now-a-days! But then again, if Ronit writes it, I'll read it too!

Ronit: Maybe a different kind of story next time!

Oh! So he'll continue writing! Nothing could've made me happier. We fans are like that; dying to have a piece of our favourite celebrities!

Vatsala: About ghosts?? Or maybe Dan Brown types!

Ronit: Don't know about that. Just generally anything that doesn't revolve around a love story!

Vatsala: Oh . . . best luck :)

People are putting up their status about your upcoming book!

Ronit: They are???

Vatsala: Yep . . . there's this girl, Akansha. I don't know her personally . . .

We became friends chatting on your status once . . .

Ronit: Ohh yes! I saw that!

For some reason, ever since the announcement of his book, Ronit had started using *Ohh* instead of our regular *Oh*. And for some reason, I'd noticed!

Vatsala: You remember?? We were going all crazy about you . . .

Ronit: Hehe! :P :P I read through half the conversation at least . . .

There was some talk about her boyfriend or something, I guess!

Vatsala: Yeah, she has a boyfriend . . .

I waited for five seconds before adding . . .

Vatsala: I don't!

Ronit: I know.

Vatsala: You're single too!

Ronit: I know that too.

Why was he putting one full stop? I was getting nervous, so I backed off a little.

Vatsala: Of course you know . . . was just stating facts!

Ronit: Hehe! :P :P

Now, that was slightly encouraging!

Vatsala: A girl can always dream!! ;)

Ronit: C'mon! You flatter. I am sure you will find someone tonnes better than me! :P

'Really? Like who? Brad Pitt?' the older me thought. But the newer me, who was into the lovey-dovey stuff, wondered 'Was that a compliment?'

I decided to take none of the two options. I decided to flirt.

Vatsala: I ain't looking . . . when you're here!! ;)

I crossed my fingers.

Ronit: Now that's inviting. :) :) Though, I'm really a terrible guy to date!

Vatsala: I'm sure you're not!

Ronit: I am. I am cold and heartless!

Same as me! *Perfect*. But I didn't tell him that I was cold and heartless too; I didn't want to ruin my chances with him!

Vatsala: No, you aren't. And even if you are, a girl always knows how to mould a guy her way!!

He took a little longer to reply to that and by the time he did, I had chewed my nails off and they had started to hurt (and needless to say, looked supremely ugly).

I consider that dialogue a bold move and I'm proud of myself till this day for having the guts to deliver it!

Ronit: Aha! I am solid as a rock man! Very stubborn!

I forgave him for calling me 'man' this time. Hell, I was so busy with the rest of what he'd said, that I didn't even notice that one word! I had tried a bold move and he hadn't backed off. That was progress. I was positively on cloud nine.

Vatsala: Hmmm . . . We'll find a way to make it work :P

I never got to know his reaction to this particular comment. One thing I forgot to mention about Ranchi (but you most probably would've guessed by now) was that like all other small cities/big towns in India, it faced frequent unannounced power cuts. It wasn't so bad there, it being the capital city of the state, but 4-5 hours a day was a norm.

Disappointed, yet strangely content, I left for Ankit's place. I was late by an hour and a half. In the fifteen minute drive from my house to Ankit's, I went through all possible excuses I could make for being so late.

Turned out, I didn't need any; he was fast asleep.

I silently entered his room, took out a book from my bag and sat down at his study table, pretending to study. Then I started clearing my throat loudly, rustling pages of my book and making other seemingly innocent noises to wake him up. Nothing worked. After one whole minute of pencil tapping, I finally had to drag my chair on the floor several times to make noise of intensity optimum to wake him up.

He stirred, opened his eyes and sat up on his bed with a jerk. I envied him; what grace he had! I looked like shit whenever I woke up from sleep and was usually in a shitty mood, too. He looked . . . normal. *How?*

"Hey, sleepyhead," I greeted. Why did I call him that? I hated nicknames, didn't I?

"Since when have you been here?" he asked.

Since when have you been sleeping? "Umm . . . it's been sometime." I answered vaguely.

"Shit! I've been asleep for over an hour!"

"Yeah. I thought of waking you up . . ."

"Then why didn't you?" he asked next.

"Because you were looking so cute . . . and serene . . ." What the hell! Did I actually say that? *Why?*

"Huh?" he gave me a half-puzzled, half-suspicious look.

I shrugged and changed the topic. "Anyway, I thought I'd start studying and get a bit ahead of you!" I couldn't understand why people had such big issues with lies. You get into trouble – you lie your way out, it was as simple as that.

And I was pretty good at lying, unlike the sweet and nice girls who stammer and falter and end up getting caught. I could look you in the eye and lie with such towering level of conviction that you'd never think twice before trusting me blindly.

Or so I thought.

"So, how much did you study in the past hour?"

What's your problem? Why are you interrogating me? I'm not a bloody criminal or something. "Not much . . . I didn't understand —"

"What?" he was there by my side in a second. Why did he have to be such big scholar, Mr. Know-It-All!

"Anything. I didn't get a thing, so I gave up." I wished I knew the titles of some of the topics, so I could at least lie with conviction.

"Which chapter?"

Let it go, already! "First. Anyway, guess what! I set a new high score in Angry Birds while you were asleep. Isn't that great?"

Then on, the conversation got a lot easier. Phew!

"*Beta*, do you need anything?" Ankit's mother asked. I didn't know who she was talking to, as she refers to both of us as *Beta*, but I didn't want to let such a chance go. So while Ankit shook his head, I ordered, "something to eat please, Aunty. I'm starved." I was always starved.

After Maa, if there was someone who never failed to make my mouth water, it was Ankit's mother. She was a housewife and I had already decided by then to marry a guy whose mother is a housewife.

And that if I didn't get a suitable prospect, I'd marry Ankit!

Chat-19

Hickey

November 19th, 2010

It was settled. I love Ronit. Now all I had to do was to figure out a way to make him fall in love with me too.

I decided to take it slow. No one likes you if you come onto them too strongly. Especially boys . . . they have such big commitment-issues, I could only imagine what would happen if I start acting all clingy.

Now that I was sure I loved him, I resolved to find ways to make sure the conversations between us stayed interesting. Music is a language I speak. If only I knew what kind of music he liked . . .

I soon found out, from his Profile Info: Metallica, Iron Maiden, Snoop Dogg and Lil Wayne. I ruled out the latter two because I knew for a fact that even if I die trying, I wouldn't be able to come even close to liking their music. I didn't have a problem with rap music or anything, in fact I loved Eminem. But these two were just plain lewd.

So that leaves out the first two . . . that was the day I started listening to heavy metal. And never stopped.

Ronit added four photos of himself on FB that night, but I couldn't comment. Thanks to Avi.

So I sent him a Message instead.

Vatsala: Loved the pics you uploaded today . . . Couldn't comment there, I told you about Avi . . .

He'll make my life hell if I do :(

Ronit: But I miss your comments! ;) Grrr :x

Vatsala: Hahaha :D But this guy . . . He's my cousin . . . won't let me flirt openly. . . .

Ronit: I can so kick him out ;)

For the uninformed, if Ronit removes Avi from his friend list, Avi would no longer be able to open Ronit's Photos and thus won't be able to see my Comments.

Vatsala: Thanks, but no . . . he's okay. I can handle him, I guess!

I can compliment you on your photos here if you want!

Ronit: I want them there! :(

I clear my inbox every few days! :P

Vatsala: Gosh! You really are stubborn! :P

Ronit: See? Told ya! :P

Vatsala: Hehe! Okay, fine . . . I'll comment when I login tomorrow . . . off to sleep now . . .

Good night :)

Ronit: 'Night :D

I didn't Comment on his Photos right away to keep something for the next day. Now that I'd decided to woo the guy, I had to plan every move intelligently.

Gosh! I sounded like some vamp from one of those God-awful soap operas. (Not Pavitra Rishta, though. It was kind of cool!)

That night, Akansha asked me, 'What do you guys talk about?' After that, I started sending the entire Chats I had with Ronit to her as Messages on FB. Whoever invented copy-paste was a genius!

And it was around that time too, that I stopped clearing my Inbox. Those Messages were too precious to let me hit Delete.

Akansha also asked me for my cell phone number. I gave it to her. Logging into Facebook every time we wanted to talk was such a hassle. Exchanging numbers seemed like a reasonable option.

I didn't tell Jaanvi or Ankit about it though; I could only imagine their reactions . . . 'Are you sure it's a girl? Ever heard of the term *fake profile?* Don't complain if you start getting calls and messages from unknown numbers . . .'

They were such adults, I tell you!

One of the adults called.

"Hey!" I said.

"Come outside," Jaanvi shrieked into the phone.

"Why are you shouting?"

"Because I'm excited!" The pitch of her voice didn't lower by the slightest notch.

"Don't tell me you had sex with Nilaap."

"What?"

"Oh . . . nothing . . . you were so excited . . . so I thought . . ." *Why did I always have to speak my mind?*

"Moron! No we didn't," she giggled. *She giggled*. When did she start doing that? I hated girly girls. Giggling should be banned!

"What happened?" I was outside by then.

"I have something to show you." She wasn't starry eyed this time. And there wasn't a big ugly stuffed animal in the backseat of her car. I was relieved.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Get in the car, silly," she said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. She was acting very weird. She had been overexcited when she told me that she was going out with Nilaap and starry eyed when they'd kissed. Twelve times. (God! I couldn't get that thought off my mind!)

What now? What did the excessive giggling mean?

I didn't have to wait too long to find out. When I got into the car, she pulled down the neckline of her T-shirt to reveal a reddish-blue bruise.

"OH MY GOD! What happened?" I screamed. It didn't make sense; Jaanvi was all excited and giggly and the reason was a hideous blue blotch? Had she totally lost it?

"Nothing *happened*! It's a hickey, you dumbass!"

"Hickey?"

"Love bite! Where have you been living? Don't you know *anything*?"

"I know what hickey means. I was just . . ." I had been wondering how on earth would Ronit be able to give me a hickey *online*.

I didn't tell Jaanvi that, of course. She would've had me admitted to RINPAS (Ranchi Institute of Neuro-Psychiatry & Allied Sciences); the mental hospital Ranchi was so famous all over India for.

Now that I come to think of it, I should've admitted myself into it. I was in need of some intense mental therapy.

Jaanvi wasn't in a much better mental state either. For reasons beyond me, she asked me to click pictures of her precious hickey. She was making very odd expressions, so I cut her face off the photos I took, focussing just at the hickey.

That night, as I looked at the photos of Jaanvi's love bite, I resolved never to let Ronit (or anyone for that matter) give me one. Who in his right mind would like to be bitten and be clawed at? Wouldn't it hurt?

When I asked Jaanvi this question, she agreed that it did hurt and teamed it with something like 'there's pleasure in the pain.'

I was suddenly reminded of Enrique Iglesias. '*Maybe I just wanna hurt you, the sweetest pleasure is pain*.'

And I once used to like that song. *Frigging unbelievable*.

What was happening to the human race? The whole 'Evolution of Man' theory . . . was it a flow chart or a cycle? Human beings were turning into apes again. *Bloody animals!*

Chat-20

Eyeliner & Cigarettes

November 20th, 2010

"Eyeliner & Cigarettes," I said. "That's the title of Ronit's upcoming book."

"What kind of title is that?" Akansha mused.

"No idea. But he said the novel is about him. So—"

"Really? It's his true story?"

"He said so. It's written in first person and the protagonist is named Ronit too." I proudly gave away the information – Privileged information. Now that Jaanvi was so engrossed in her happening love life and I could hardly discuss the Ronit front of my life with Ankit, Akansha was my only available option.

And she turned out to be a good listener, hanging onto every word I said with profound interest. That was the first time we had talked on phone and the call lasted for over an hour.

She said something which made me feel marginally less insane. Just when I was about to hang up, she said, "It was so refreshing

talking to you. You know, my friends are so fed up with my talks about Ronit, even mentioning his name in front of them is a taboo now."

"Tell me about it. Story of our lives," I replied. "Hey, did you see that Photo he uploaded today?"

"Which one?"

"He uploaded just one. It is awesome. I can just go on and on about it. He has this broad smile on his face, *that adorable dimple*, wearing all black, blurred lights in the background . . . His best picture ever!"

"Let me check."

"Don't miss! It's absolutely breathtaking. I couldn't breathe for ages after I first looked at it. *Literally*."

By the time we hung up, I knew a lot about her and it was a welcome change, talking to someone new. The number of enemies I had superseded the number of friends I had remarkably, owing to my too frank and undiplomatic – and many a time unbelievably rude and arrogant – behaviour. Ahh! Despicable me!

In fact, my mother, Jaanvi and Ankit were the only people who were actually close to me. Even that was because of their own generous decision to bear with me and stick by my side no matter what. They loved me for reasons that were beyond me. I don't know what they saw in me that was worth loving. But whatever it was, I thanked God for it.

And I found Akansha very different. We bonded, although all we had in common was a crush on Ronit. She was from Amritsar and even though she wasn't a Punjabi, she spoke their language very well (not that I could have known otherwise!). She had a strange Punjabi accent which was immensely cute and childlike. (And I no longer had an issue with the word cute!)

After keeping the phone down, I went through her Photos, too. The only photo of her I'd seen before then was her Display Picture, which was very hazy and didn't allow much. It could've been any girl; half Indian girls have same gross structure.

"Who is she?" a voice asked from behind.

"Akansha Sharma. I told you about her . . ." I answered Jaanvi.

"Huh?" she gave a blank expression.

"The one who sent me a Friend Request after we chatted at Ronit's Status," I elaborated.

"Oh yes! Making friends on Facebook, eh?"

"She's nice. Anyway, what brings you here? Aren't you busy kissing or biting?" I teased.

"Not today!" she laughed. "I had something important to discuss . . . ."

"What is it?" I asked after I put my laptop in sleep mode.

"Ronit. What's going on?"

I knew this was coming, just hadn't expected it this soon. Although I had known Ankit for twice as long time as her, she was way closer to him. They were caring people, people who actually liked interaction and respected everyone's feelings and emotions.

And I . . . no matter how hard I tried – and I didn't try very hard at all – I couldn't bring myself to *care*. About people, their feelings, relationships . . . Very few people mattered to me. I was a loner and was genuinely happy that way.

And I didn't fit in. Period.

I was one of a kind. Maybe God had realised his mistake after creating me and never repeated it. There simply wasn't anyone like me. That was the reason why I never had a best friend. Even though I somehow did make a few friends, I could never keep the friendship. I didn't know how to.

And then Ankit came into my life; my first best friend. The friendship hadn't shattered like before, for a sole reason – Ankit didn't let that happen. He was one person in the world who actually understood me, who actually accepted me and loved me with all my flaws.

Much like my father—Much like my *dead* father.

Growing up, I hadn't minded all the broken friendships because I knew that no matter what happened, I had him, my father. I had him and I cared for nothing else. Not anymore. His death had destroyed me. Keeping Maa company wasn't my sole reason for staying back at Ranchi for graduation. As much as I hated leaving Maa alone in such a time, I also couldn't bear staying away from her. I needed someone I could love and who'd love me back unconditionally.

Ankit had understood all this and decided to stay with me. I had tried to change his mind by convincing him that I'd be alright, but my inability to make and keep friends wasn't unknown to him. He had stayed with me during the worst phase of my life.

When we joined college and met Jaanvi, there were times when I and Jaanvi had been ready to slit each other's throat. The only

thing that kept us from doing so was Ankit's approach to keep things cool. He used emotional blackmail on the one who understood emotions, Jaanvi. And soon there came a time when I could do almost *anything* to her, and her only reaction would be a saccharine sweet smile.

However, after the rough first few months, we had grown on each other. I got another best friend, courtesy of the first one.

And now, even though I could claim that I meant more to Ankit, compared to Jaanvi and he knew me better than her, I couldn't say I knew Ankit better than Jaanvi. And although emotionally ill-equipped that I was, it somehow bothered me.

She couldn't understand why I didn't return his feelings. She thought we were perfect for each other, that we complemented each other. I had no idea what it meant.

It didn't matter anymore anyway, I had made my decision and it was time to be honest.

"I love him."

"What?"

"I love him," I repeated.

"You *love* Ronit? You love *Ronit? You* love. . . ."

"Repeating the same sentence, emphasising a different word each time won't change a thing. Yes Jaanvi, I love Ronit. I have decided."

"*Decided*? How can someone *decide* such a thing? And you of all people! Do you even know the meaning of love?" she burst out.

"Hey, just because I don't love Ankit doesn't mean I don't know the meaning of love!"

"Don't drag Ankit into this. We are discussing you and Ronit here. Stay on the topic."

"Okay."

She released a breath, as if to calm herself. "Why do you think you love him?"

"I just do. He's smart, good-looking, fun to talk to . . . you know. . . .He has a good sense of humour . . ."

"I can say the same things about Ankit, among a hundred other qualities."

"Now you're bringing Ankit in."

"I just meant generally. . . .Like there are loads of other guys with all the things you said. What's so special about Ronit?"

"He's just *special* . . . I can't explain . . . there's a spark between us . . ."

"You're not making sense."

"I don't know how to explain. I just know that I love him."

She looked exasperated at first but consequently calmed down a little. She couldn't afford to lose her power of speech this time; there was no one else to do the talking for her! She finally regained enough calm to pose another question. "Ok. So we'll assume that you do love him for real. What about him? Does he return your feelings?"

"I'm not sure . . ."

"Elaborate."

"He knows me by now. Yesterday, he said he missed my Comments on his Photos. When I Posted Comments on them this morning, he replied to all of them with thanks and smileys. And he normally doesn't acknowledge every Comment with replies, you know that—"

"But that doesn't count to anything!"

"*He knows me,* Jaanvi. It does—"

"Are you sure? He knows how many siblings you have?"

"I have none!"

"He knows that?"

I shook my head.

"He knows what your favourite movie is? And novel? Music? Music is like THE most important thing in your life, he knows that? He knows about your unusual affinity to blood? And the smell of *beedi* smoke? He knows that you love eating? Or that you hate make-up? That you hate girls who act like girls? That—"

"Stop it. All these things don't matter."

"Look who's talking! Why did you start listening to Iron Maiden and Metallica then?"

"Just to have things to talk about," I answered truthfully.

"Already short of things to talk about?"

"You don't understand. He's my type of person."

"What's your type?"

"You know the novel he's writing . . . It's titled 'Eyeliner & Cigarettes'. If Ankit wrote one, I'm sure he'll name it something like 'Rainbow and Butterflies'."

"Where did Ankit come from?"

I ignored her. "Ankit is a type of person, who watches a movie like Hellboy 2 and notices that song . . . What was its name? Can't Live Without You?"

"Can't Smile Without You," she corrected.

"Yeah, that. Pathetic. I mean, when Hellboy sang it, it was justified; he was drunk. But what possible reason could Ankit have for

loving that song? And This Girl? When I listened to Step Up 3D soundtrack, I didn't even notice that song! And he chose 'This Girl' over 'Take Your Shirt Off' and 'Club Can't Handle Me'? How is that—"

"Take Your. . . .Reminds me of. . . .Catch you later!" Jaanvi said and just like that, she was gone.

What was that? I wondered. Fearing that she'd spill the beans, I sent her an SMS as soon as she left.

Vatsala: Don't tell Ankit anything about Ronit yet. I want to tell him myself . . .

Jaanvi: As you wish :)

The emoticon she sent wasn't :x or :/, so she wasn't angry with me anymore. Phew!

I logged onto Facebook and sent Ronit a Message telling him how much I adored the picture he uploaded that day, to which he replied,

Ronit: :) :) Just being kind you!!! :P :P :P

How can someone be so humble? *How?*

Chat-21

Closer...

November 21st, 2010

When I saw Ronit online, I craved to talk to him. Problem was, I didn't have anything to talk about. I hadn't become a metal fan by then!

Vatsala: Hey . . .

Ronit: Hey!

Vatsala: Watched Dabangg?

Or Golmaal 3?

Just wondering . . .

Ronit: The former, yes!

Thrice, I guess ;)

Awesome!!

Vatsala: Yeah, I wasn't a big Salman fan before . . .

I am now!

I might've started liking Salman a little after *Dabanng*, but I still preferred Shah Rukh to Salman. Salman didn't have a hope in hell to ever match what SRK has achieved. One of the reasons I loved him so was also that he said at Koffee With Karan that God has given him everything he asked for and a lot more, but just not the ability to make and keep friends. We had that in common. He inspired me. He motivated me to achieve things in life even with the flaw we'd been *blessed* with.

Anyway, back to that conversation. . .

Ronit: Hehe! :P :P

Vatsala: I liked G-3 more though!

Ronit: Will watch it when I come to Mumbai :D

Vatsala: You're coming to India?

Ronit: Yes!

First week of December.

Vatsala: So we'll get to see you on MTV again?

Ronit: Ohh yeah!

Later Akansha told me that he was coming to India for good. The shooting for his movie in Sydney was wrapped up.

So that meant Ronit would be closer to me than before, geographically. It made me immensely happy.

"Come to my place," Jaanvi ordered on the phone.

"Okay," I agreed without asking any questions because I was getting bored anyway. BBA students get quite accustomed to *vella-panti*, and it was a Sunday anyway.

When I reached Jaanvi's house (correction – bungalow, that monster of a residence cannot be called *house*!), Nilaap came to the gate to receive me.

"Hi," I greeted.

"Hey! They're waiting for us in the basement."

"They?"

"Jaanvi and Ankit. She said she had a surprise for us . . . wouldn't let me in . . . until you came . . ."

I caught only a few words from what Nilaap was saying, my mind was elsewhere. Did Jaanvi tell Ankit about Ronit? Had they

planned a confrontation? In front of Nilaap? Or maybe they'd finally realised that they should date each other and so they decided to break the news to Nilaap and me together . . .

Where do such thoughts come in my mind from?

What they had in store was more of a surprise and less of a shock – they had been interested in new dance forms and they wanted to show us what they'd been rehearsing. They performed a fusion of street dance, bey-boying and hip hop. I was stunned.

I mean – sure – I knew both of them were amazing dancers, but this . . . this was a novelty even for them. Whenever they danced together, they mostly opted for contemporary or salsa. As solo performers, Ankit was awesome at hip hop and Jaanvi at traditional Indian dance styles.

This was something I never knew they could do. Ankit, who was already so good at hip hop, stole the show while Jaanvi (when I finally did notice her after tearing my eyes off Ankit) danced with such grace . . . Grace, in street dance!

They were both sensational.

And the music. *Take Your Shirt Off*. When the song was about to end and T-Pain said 'Take Your Shirt Off' for the last time, *Ankit actually did that.* He took his T-shirt off. Delicious! (I sometimes wonder why I use the adjectives used for food while referring to both Ankit and Ronit. Edible. Yum. Mouth-watering. Delicious).

I told you, I wouldn't be surprised if he someday revealed some solid packs beneath his T-shirts, didn't I?

I almost fainted.

After the music ended, Jaanvi came to me and whispered, "You're in deep shit, eh?"

I didn't know what that meant, so I decided to ignore it altogether. I had other, more pressing, thoughts on my mind, "You told him?"

"What?"

"About yesterday! This song, I mentioned it just—"

"Yeah. As if we rehearsed the whole dance in just one day, idiot!" she said and left me there standing alone, to go to Nilaap. "How was it?" I heard her ask him.

After Ankit put on his T-shirt again, I went to him.

"Hey," I said. Seriously, why was I blushing?

"Hi. So? What do you think?" he asked.

"It was out of the world. I had no idea you dance *so* well. Since when have you been practising this?" I was breathing right again.

"About a month, I guess. Maybe a little over it," he replied.

"It was as if right out of some Step Up movie. You guys are fabulous!" My heartbeat had returned to its normal pace.

"Come on! You're exaggerating," he smiled.

It's not only Ronit who could be humble.

"No. I'm serious," I looked down. I was shy of meeting his eyes. I repeat – I was shy of meeting his eyes. *What was happening to me?*

"Thank you. Means a lot," Ankit said.

"We're going out. Are you guys coming?" Jaanvi asked, motioning please-say-no with her eyes.

"No," I answered for both of us, granting her her wish. "You guys go ahead." I turned to Ankit and asked, "Do you have time?"

"For?"

I couldn't think of anything. I just wanted to be with him, spend some time with him . . . Shallow that I was, one mind-blowing dance performance, one glimpse of that *alluring* body and selection of one 'my-type' of song was all it took to blow me away.

I was seeing Ankit in a new light and I could feel the changes in myself too, I was turning into a *girl* type of a girl.

I wouldn't be surprised if I start liking Sugar tomorrow, I thought.

"Nothing special. Just like that . . ." I shrugged, feigning nonchalance.

"Sure. How about—"

"No. I don't want to go to Ecstasy today. I don't want to eat." That was a first.

He raised his eyebrows, "I wasn't about to suggest Ecstasy—"

"Let's go to your place. Terrace. We'll just sit and talk." That was something we did when we were in school and after my father's death. It had been a long time since we'd done that, and I had forgotten how nice it felt.

Sitting there under the shade of a green coloured fibre roof, I was taken back to a time lost in memories. A time which had brought me close to Ankit. But the time I had that day surpassed every precious memory.

"I didn't remember it being so good," I confessed.

"I do," he replied.

"I guess I missed it." Which was true. Sometimes it's not until you get something back that you realise how much you had been missing it.

"Same here."

Right at that moment, I understood what Jaanvi had meant when she'd said – quite cockily, at that – "You're in deep shit."

Chat-22

Lipstick

November 22nd, 2010

For reasons I can’t explain, I found myself at Ankit’s doorsteps early the next morning. (Early by my standards, it was 10 o’ clock!) I had even taken bath *and* combed my hair, which is an effort, if you’re talking about me, especially on a cold winter morning.

“We’re not going to college today,” I announced as soon as he opened the door.

“I wasn’t going anyway. I told you yesterday, remember?”

“What? When?” I and my shitty memory!

“I’m taking CAT in six days.”

“Oh yeah! I forgot. I’m so sorry I disturbed you,” I said and turned on my heels to leave.

“Hey, a few minutes won’t hurt . . . and it isn’t as if I study 24 hours a day . . . I wouldn’t have started so soon anyway . . .” he gave excuses to make me stay.

He wanted me there, with him.

I smiled, “As if you even need to study. You’ll get calls from all the IIMs.”

“I wish it were up to you!”

“Why aren’t you in college?” Rohan, Ankit’s younger brother asked.

“Why aren’t *you* in school?” I shot back.

His hand flew to his belly, “My stomach hurts.” He mocked. He wasn’t that young; he studied in ninth standard.

“We totally believe you,” I laughed.

He came closer and whispered, “Have plans with girlfriend.”

“I figured.”

“Hey, give me your phone,” he said.

“Give me your PSP.”

We exchanged gadgets. Playing Angry Birds on PSP using analogue button was a welcome change after the touch screen of my iPhone got monotonous. (You already know that I own an iPhone, so this doesn’t count as bragging!)

I sat with Ankit in his room for about an hour as he tried to study and as I tried to break Rohan’s high scores. When I realised that we both were failing terribly, I took my leave.

Not before having the mouth-watering breakfast his mother prepared, though.

Ankit was busy preparing for CAT and so was Jaanvi. Though she wasn’t serious about MBA, she had applied and had received an admit card, so taking the test seemed the sensible option.

Not for me. When have I done a sensible thing in my life anyway?

I had decided against MBA, so I considered taking CAT a waste of my time.

I used the all-important, precious time spamming on Facebook.

Ronit had added a new Album, to his Profile, having *ten* new Photos of him. *Ten*. I got my time pass!

I posted a senseless Comment on one picture:

Vatsala: Smarty pants!

<I know it doesn’t even make sense! Still it was the first thing that came into my mind> :P ;)

Sometime later, Akansha commented on the same Photo (after I promptly sent her an SMS informing her about the new addition to Ronit’s Albums).

Akansha: Looking so sweet . . . n your lips, why are they so pink?! :P

Vatsala: Hush, it’s a secret!

Not anymore: it’s lipstick re!

I’ve noticed in so many pics :P :P

Not that I could’ve missed it, with Avi reminding me of ‘The Gay Guy you like’ every time we talked!

Akansha: Haha, don’t tell me Vatsala . . . but which brand? I want it ;)

Vatsala: Ask him, I don’t know his favourite lipstick brand!

My favourite is Revlon!

:P :P

Ronit: Grrrrr . . .

Both Akansha and I Liked Ronit’s comment.

Vatsala: Chill ;)

We’re both-like-your biggest fans EVER, so you know we’re just kidding! :P :D

And anyway, they’re your lips . . .

You can apply whatever brand of whatever you want! Who are we to complain!? :P

Akansha: Hahaha, yeah Ronit, we were just kidding!
But I really wanted to know the brand. Haha :D

And then we discussed lipstick brands a little. Not that I was a lipstick person, but I did own quite a few. *Relatives abroad.*

Vatsala: God! We're crazy, aren't we? ;)
Akansha: Haha yeah Vatsala, discussing lipstick brand . . . yes we are HELL CRAZY!!

Some unknown boy had started to interfere in our conversation. And yes, he sent me a Friend Request, which I promptly ignored.

Vatsala: So let's take the discussion elsewhere, Akansha.
I'll text you :)
Akansha: ;))

I had no idea why some guys send Friend Requests to random girls. All the info my Profile gave to strangers was – Vatsala Rathore, Female and a Display Picture. I'd set my DP as the cover page of a novel, Betrayed. So what was it about my Profile that was so *enticing*?

I didn't realise my name itself was such powerful "friend" magnet!

Chat-23

Dreams & Plans

November 24th, 2010

Everybody was doing something about their future. Ankit's future was decided, Jaanvi was trying to decide and here I was, stuck with a dream of becoming a VJ, with no idea whatsoever how to go about it.

Was there some kind of an audition? Do I just get up and go to Mumbai and start auditioning for random shows on random TV channels? Was there a course? Or do I have to get into Roadies or Splitsvilla (Yuck!) or the kind?

I waited for thirty hours for Ronit to come online. Usually, he's online almost all the time, but whenever I needed him, it seemed like he disappeared off the face of the earth.

Vatsala: Hey! :)
Ronit: Hi!!
Vatsala: Where have you been?
Ronit: Busy with stuff . . .

He replied vaguely, which was fine by me. I wasn't in a mood to talk about him that day. My career plan, or rather the loss of it, was bothering me. But frankly, majority of our conversations did revolve around him. It was like we were always talking about him.

Vatsala: Listen, tell me something . . .
How did you become a VJ?
Ronit: Just got lucky to be noticed, I guess!
:D

Aargh! Couldn't he be a little more specific?

Vatsala: Noticed, where?
Ronit: By someone at my radio station . . .
I was working part-time as an RJ at HOT FM . . .
Vatsala: Part-time with?
Ronit: Mass comm.
Vatsala: Oh, great!

"Mass Communication. That's what I'm going to do," I said aloud. It took me just a couple of microseconds to decide. It couldn't have taken any longer, considering I worshipped him so. He was like God to me.

I'd take up a Mass comm. course at a good college in Mumbai and find a job as an RJ. Then I'll get noticed too, and I'll be offered job as a VJ. For MTV. It was settled.

Now all I needed to do was search good colleges in Mumbai that offered Mass comm. (Master's degree) and find out their admission procedures.

My phone ringed. "Hey Jaanvi!"

"This is so bad!" she sounded very low, almost tearful.

"What is so bad?" I asked.

"This. Studying. I can't do this," her voice broke.

"Hey, come on! Relax. It'll be okay." That's what friends say when their friend is undergoing exam mania.

"No, it won't. I'm hopeless! Why am I even trying?"

"Shut up! Don't think like that. Study with a cool mind."

"Study what?"

"You don't have the material? Ask Ankit—"

"I have the study material, but there's too much to study . . . too little time . . . what's the use?"

"Clearing CAT isn't about memorising the study material the coaching classes design. If your Maths and English—"

"Shut up!" She cut me off. "Don't feed me bullshit."

"Want me to come over?" I asked slowly.

"ASAP."

I was there in half an hour. We went out to our favourite stall for *pani-puri*. It worked, Jaanvi was much calmer by the time we got back to her place.

"You know, it doesn't matter either way," I said.

"What?"

"Even if you get a good B-School, I don't think you should pursue MBA. You hate studying BBA, but do it just for the sake of getting a graduation degree. But that done, I don't think you should take up a PG course that doesn't suit you either."

"I know that. I've thought about it too. But what do I do then? You know that if I don't take up a course as an excuse to run away to another city, my parents will marry me off."

"Don't be such a kid! They won't do that without your consent."

"Yes, they won't. But they'll pressurise me till I . . . till I give in . . . to the temptation."

"Temptation? *You WANT TO get married?*"

"Sometimes I do . . . ," she grinned sheepishly. "But I'm sure, if I stay here, they'll recount the many virtues of marriage so many times that—"

"So that is your motivation for opting for MBA?"

"More or less, yeah."

"You're almost as crazy as I am," I said, shaking my head.

"So now I'm a certified lunatic?" she asked.

"Oh yeah! You sure are!" We laughed.

I called Ankit later that night to discover that he was doing pretty well. Amongst the three of us, he was the only one whose dreams and plans were going in sync. I envied him.

Chat-24

Lovesick Crack-head

November 28th, 2010

With the decision of my future final and Jaanvi's test finally done with (though it didn't go all that well at all) we were back to being the girls that we were just a couple of months ago. She had even forgiven Ronit for stealing my heart for a minute. And at that minute, she was back to being smitten by Ronit, too.

"It must be odd, na?"

"What?" I asked.

"Having your worst fear as – Waking up to find that Ronit deleted his Facebook Account!"

"Shut up!"

"No really. My worst fear is still Ghost Lizards!"

"Why did you have to mention that?" I groaned.

Ghost Lizards. There were only two things in the world that I was scared of. One was Ghosts and the other was Lizards. *Imagine their combination.* They made appearances in my dreams and terrified me to the bones, especially if they had long tongues. Bifurcated at the tip, red in colour. They made a sound every time they thrust their tongues out and suck it back in. I knew such a lizard did not exist, but in my dreams, they did. The most hideous combination of Geckos, Iguanas, Chameleons and Skinks, possessing ghostly powers to top all that . . .

There wasn't a scene scarier than a lizard hunting and eating a pathetic little insect. I didn't want to be that insect. I didn't want to be a lizard's prey.

Yet, the prospect of waking up to find Ronit's FB Account missing was *way* scarier than Ghost Lizards. No contact with Ronit ever? I was positive I would've died.

Given an option, I would've preferred being attacked by a lizard. Singular, mind you. (I'd have to rethink if the number of lizards was more than one! That didn't mean I loved Ronit any less, though!)

"Hey, he's online," Jaanvi exclaimed.

"He's online almost all the time."

"I want to chat with him. I've never done it before," she said and logged into her FB Account. Sadly for her, no matter how many messages she sent, Ronit didn't acknowledge any of them with a reply. "What is *wrong* with this guy?" she let out in frustration.

"He doesn't reply to everyone!" I said and as a proof, sent him a Message from my Account. He replied almost instantaneously. Thank God! He didn't let me down when I had audience!

Vatsala: Hey there!

Ronit: Hi!

Jaanvi snatched my laptop away and said, "I'll chat with him today. Let me see how you fell for him so badly."

"No way! You'll ruin everything." I protested but she paid no heed.

"Let's see if he passes the test."

"What test?"

Vatsala: Mumbai is bad :(

Ronit: Why?

Vatsala: I arrived here just this morning and already the cussing and swearing . . .

Ronit: Why so?

"Is he dumb or what?" Jaanvi wondered aloud.

Vatsala: Arey, I wasn't the one doing it! I was talking about the people here . . .

Ronit: Ohh! That way . . .

"He doesn't care about you. He didn't ask Why? Or What happened? or the like," she announced.

Vatsala: When are you getting here?

Ronit: 5th Dec

Vatsala: Oh Crap! I'll be back home before you come! :(

Ronit: No worries! Some other time, I'm sure :D

"See? He's looking forward to meet me sometime," I smirked.

"He said that just because it seemed like an appropriate response."

"Your judgement is biased."

"Okay, I allow him a point. The score is one all."

"Score?" I asked but she ignored me.

Vatsala: Hmmm . . . don't watch Break Ke Baad. Horrible movie :(

Ronit: I didn't even know such a movie existed!

"What? And he's an actor? 2-1."

Vatsala: It does. You watched HP 7?

Ronit: Now what's that?

"This is bad," Jaanvi whispered.

Vatsala: Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part-1

Ronit: OHH! No, I haven't!

"He's not a Potter fan," I justified.

"Let's see . . ."

Vatsala: Oh, right. You're not a Potter fan . . . figures . . .

Ronit: I do watch the movies though!

"He hasn't read HP books and he accepts he's not a Potter fan. 3-1."

"Not everyone has to like what you like."

Vatsala: Heard Sheila Ki Jawaani?

Ronit: Actually, I did!

"Thank God! He's not living in some different planet, at least. He gets a point. 3-2."

Vatsala: Sheila or Munni?

Ronit: Sheila ;) ;)

"3-3," Jaanvi allowed. We both loathed the Munni song with all our hearts. Apart from being cheap and vulgar, it also made fun of Amitabh Bachchan. Unacceptable. Unforgivable.

Though, if we consider the lyrics, figuring out the meaning of the Sheila Ki Jawaani never failed to give me a headache either.

Vatsala: Ok, answer in one word: Brad Pitt, Hugh Jackman or Robert Pattinson?

Ronit: Pitt.

"Awesome! 3-4!" I cheered. One thing in common, without my intelligent plotting!

Vatsala: Done.

Ronit: What?

"What?" I asked Jaanvi. She didn't answer. I could've killed her for the next thing she did.

Vatsala: Deciding for a poster! For my . . . er . . . washroom!!!

"*ARE YOU INSANE*?" I was exasperated.

Ronit: OHH! :P :P

His reaction calmed me a little. "He gets a point for this," I decided. "3-5."

Vatsala: Your photos have made it to in-between-pages of my Cosmos! :P :P

"Why did you say that?" I asked. I had no idea what got into Jaanvi that day. Maybe you lose your screws somewhere when you talk to a celebrity for the first time. [And just so you know, I did not have any printed photograph of Ronit. Hell, I didn't even have any saved in my laptop! I mean – sure, I loved him and everything – but if I had to fantasise about someone, holding a picture of him in my hand, why wouldn't I go for someone like Tom Cruise instead?]

Ronit: What!? No! You're just kidding! :P :P

Vatsala: I'm not . . . :-*

You can know it was Jaanvi typing because I always say 'I ain't' instead of 'I'm not.' *I like the word ain't.* And I totally hate that people always misuse it.

Ronit: *flattered*

"Humble. 3-6," I announced. And then we entered the part where we did some heavy praising and buttering and he just shrugged it all away, acting modestly. It was his forte. He didn't let success get to his head. We gained several points there, to my intense pleasure!

"I give up. This guy is solid," Jaanvi said, quite in awe of him.

"That's why I love him!" I proudly announced. That was the moment when I realised that what I had with Ronit was real. Whatever had been happening with Ankit in the past few days didn't make sense to me, but I convinced myself that it wasn't love. It was Ronit I loved.

"Oh rats! Four missed calls from Nilaap!" Jaanvi said. "And he's not receiving now. What do I do?"

"Don't look at me like that. I'm alien to all this stuff!"

"Ask your love."

"What?"

Vatsala: What do I do if I pissed off a guy real bad?

Ronit: Give him some time off, I guess!

"Your *love* is a jackass. Nilaap is angry because I didn't pay proper attention to him and I give him *time off*?"

"How was Ronit supposed to know?" I mumbled in his defence.

"He could've asked. And see, he's offline now. Means you were bothering him."

"*You* were bothering him."

"He didn't know that, did he? Anyway, I should go now. Nilaap is . . ." she trailed off.

"Yeah, go. Kiss and make up! And do some serious snogging!"

"Ciao." She winked and left.

I sat there, wondering . . . Ronit had said 'give him some time off' and had gone offline quite abruptly after that. Was there a hidden meaning behind the seemingly simple suggestion? Did he mean *he* needed some time off? Or had he simply logged out?

Whatever the case, I decided to give him some time off.

I was head over heels in love with him. But he didn't need to be reminded of that all the time.

Chat-25

Bring Me Flowers

November 30th, 2010

The last day of the month brought along with it a storm of unidentified emotions. I felt things I wasn't sure I even had the ability to feel.

The day started with Ronit going back to his unresponsive self, even though he was the one who started conversation in the first place.

One of his pictures had come up on my Homepage that morning. He wanted all his fans to suggest if it was good enough to go in the inside cover of his Eyeliner & Cigarettes.

It wasn't. I added a link to one of his smoking hot photos (the all-black-with-blurred-lights-in-background one!) and suggested he put that one instead.

He sent me a Message.

Ronit: I had chosen the exact same picture. :)

Vatsala: Yeah, that one's epic! I sent you a message about it the day you uploaded it . . . ;)

I have no idea if he remembered or not, as he didn't care to reply to my Message. I didn't know what to think, so all I thought was – *he's such an odd person!*

But that was not the big trouble. It started with my phone ringing.

"Hello!"

"Hey! Busy?" Ankit asked.

"If you count lazing around as being busy, I sure am!"

"Care to meet?"

"Where?"

"I'll pick you up."

Half an hour later, his car horn blew and I rushed out of my house.

"You look . . . different!" Hotter, I thought. Unlike the casual tees he usually preferred, he was wearing a crisp violet shirt, teamed with black jeans. What was the occasion? Was I missing something? Bloody hell! Was it his birthday?

I removed my mobile phone from my pocket and tried to check the reminders discreetly. No, it wasn't his birthday. Phew!

"What are you doing?" Ankit asked and startled me; I dropped the phone, between his legs. And stupid that I was, I bent down to pick it up before realising that it was too embarrassing. I sat back to my seat awkwardly as he picked it up and passed it to me. Wordlessly.

When I turned to look at him, I saw that he was biting the inside of his cheeks to check his laughter. I punched his arm.

"What?" he asked, faking innocence.

"Nothing!"

He was looking exceptionally handsome. I looked down at what I was wearing – an old black LinkinPark sweatshirt, paired with a pair of hideously faded basic blue jeans and black high-topped converse. I looked at Ankit's feet and was relieved to see his Pumas; he wasn't wearing formal shoes, at least. I bit my lower lip.

"Where are we going?"

"Temptations."

"Oh, thank God! The way you're dressed, I thought we were having tea at Dhoni's place!" The term 'Dhoni' was preferred over 'President' at Ranchi.

When we reached Temptations, I ordered two flavours of their largest sundaes – one for both Ankit and me. We exchanged our treats midway. (Translation – I snatched his and made him eat mine, as his was better!)

Nothing beats ice creams in winters.

"Where are we going?" I asked again when I noticed he wasn't taking the turn back home.

"There's a place . . ."

"Where?"

"Near Ranchi."

"What are you talking about?"

"You'll know."

"Tell me now."

"No."

"Tell me *right now*."

"Hey, come on! It's a surprise."

"Fuck off, man! Screw your surprise. I hate surprises." I was getting nervous. More often than not, surprises turned out to be shocks.

"Do you just *have to* know everything?"

"*Yes*."

"Alright then. We're going to Dasham Fall."

"*WHY*? People *die* there!"

"We won't get inside the water."

"So, what'll we do then?"

He gave me a deadly look and I shut up.

Not for long, though. "I've never been to Devdi Mandir. Or the Sun Temple," I wondered loudly when I saw a road sign giving directions to Devdi Mandir.

"I know. You aren't highly spiritual."

"I want to go. For how long do we have the car?"

"All day. I'll return it to Dad at night."

"So, done, we'll visit both the temples today." I made the decision for the two of us.

"Why the sudden affinity to temples?"

"Just like that," I shrugged. "Dhoni visits Devdi Mandir every time he comes home. He has turned it into a freaking tourist spot. It's a shame I haven't been there even once in my life."

That wasn't my reason for going there that day, though. I'd just wanted to delay the trip to Dasham. Or cancel it altogether if I

got that lucky.

When I'd said people die there, I hadn't been kidding. Dasham wasn't a safe place for couples, owing to the frequent naxalite attacks. Sure, I and Ankit weren't a couple, but the naxalite people didn't know so. Just thinking about the stuff they did to young couples when they got caught, sent shivers up my spine.

By the time we visited both the temples, stopped at a roadside *dhaba* as I was suddenly starved and made stops at a couple of other places as I found the scenery (which was mostly just regular road and similar looking trees) unusually compelling, it was four o' clock. We were just one kilometre away from Dasham.

Do something, quick! My mind screamed at me. But my brain was too rusty and I couldn't think of an appropriate excuse. Honesty was my only option.

"Can't we skip Dasham?"

"Why?"

"You know . . . it isn't all that safe . . ."

"We'll stay away from water."

"No, I didn't mean that way. I meant . . . the naxalites . . ."

"What? They won't bother us!" he laughed.

"How do you know?"

"Because I know. They're not exactly the way you've pictured them."

"But what if—"

"Hush! Nothing will happen."

"Are you sure?"

"Trust me. And you don't have to worry anyway. I'm here."

"Hmmm . . . what if I still don't want to go?"

"Then we won't. Your call."

I took a minute to decide. Ankit really had his heart set on Dasham and I didn't feel like denying him that. And he did have some impressive muscles . . . would he be able to take them, when (and if) the naxalites attack?

"Let's go," I made my decision. I accept I was a little excited at the prospect of coming face to face with the naxalites for the first time, having heard so much about them. And watching Ankit fight them would be even more mind blasting!

We didn't get a chance, though. When we got there, the place was almost deserted. Who visits a waterfall on a cold winter evening?

"Wow! This is beautiful," I found myself exclaiming. "I didn't expect it to be so calm and serene."

"You probably expected a Border scene here! Guns and gore, women screaming, kids crying, men dying—"

"Shut up!" Yes, I had been expecting that and I was *mildly* disappointed too.

We sat there on a rock and talked aimlessly for a while, before Ankit excused himself to fetch something from the car.

I knew what was coming. I wasn't blind.

He presented me a bouquet of beautifully arranged two dozen roses, half deep red, half white.

I could never understand why people made so much hype about a-single-bud-of-red-rose. I believed that a dozen was definitely better than one. And two dozen? *Way* better than that!

"They're lovely."

"Not lovelier than you." *Can you be any cheesier?*

"Whatever. So Mr. Ankit Rai . . . ice creams, long drive, waterfall, roses . . . planning to propose me or what?" I preferred to invite trouble, as opposed to sitting and waiting for the bomb to explode.

"Actually, I *was* thinking along those lines. When I took CAT, I realised . . . we don't have much time left . . . together . . . this might as well be my last chance . . ."

I chose to stay silent.

"Look at me."

I met his eyes.

"You have beautiful eyes. Very honest and expressive."

"Thank you," I said automatically. When you're a daughter of a school teacher, manners are something you never forget. I took a deep breath, preparing myself.

"You're the best person I've ever known. You're gentle and kind and I've been in love with you for over four years now. I think I know you more than you know yourself. You project yourself as someone you're not. I know who you actually are and I'm in love with that girl. Frankly, I'm in love with both the sides of you."

This is how selfless and altruistic he could get. I was touched. I felt loved.

But I didn't know how to react. After my mother, Ankit was the person I loved most in the world. *But not in the romantic way*. Okay, that wasn't true anymore. Feelings were budding at the romantic front too, but compared to what I felt for Ronit . . .

"Let's go. It's getting cold," I said but made no move to get up.

"I need an answer, Vatsala," he said softly.

Then I said the worst thing possible. In my defence, I was just being honest.

"I love Ronit."

"Don't be stupid."

"I'm serious. I love him and I intend to make him fall in love with me too."

"Do you have any idea how childish you sound?"

"You don't understand, Ankit! Ronit is someone I connect to—"

"Don't give me that bullshit. For four years, you have been brushing off my feelings saying you don't believe in love. Now, out of the blue—" he seemed more confused than angry.

"You're just jealous."

"Damn right I'm jealous. He's a guy I'm losing the girl I love to. Tell me how *not* to be jealous?"

"But Ankit, I really love him."

"What is love, Vatsala?"

"You know what; I'm fed up of all this. You and Jaanvi . . . you guys think I don't understand what love is. But, *breaking news*, I do. I know it's real with Ronit. He's my type—"

"How can you be so sure?"

"I like talking to him. He's smart and funny . . . we have similar choices in . . . he . . . he . . ." I had nothing to say. I realised then and there that even though I liked pretending otherwise, Ronit and I had nothing in common. (Everyone likes Brad Pitt, so that didn't count). I liked to think that the future held something wonderful for the two of us, but I knew I was living a lie. Not that I was going to accept that in front of Ankit. "He likes heavy metal."

"And I don't, so I'm not man enough?"

"I didn't say that." In fact if we compare Ankit to Ronit, Ankit seemed like more of a man. Avi called Ronit gay so many times that at times even I found him a weeny bit gay-ish! And even though I knew he didn't apply lipstick, his lips really were exceptionally pink, by guys' standard. But I loved him nevertheless.

"Listen Vatsala, just say you don't love me. Believe me, this is the last time. Making excuses like you love Ronit is plain ridiculous. Just tell me you don't love me. That would be enough. I'll stop bothering you."

I couldn't. I couldn't look him in the eye and say that I didn't love him. I wasn't sure what to think or say anymore. My feelings were getting more and more jumbled with every passing second.

"I don't want to lose you," I mumbled at last. No, Vatsala Rathore, you won't cry. You'll not let a single teardrop escape your eyes.

"You won't. I'll always be there for you, I promise. But I'll just stop hoping for you to fall in love with me . . . I need some sanity."

I couldn't bear to continue the conversation. I knew I was breaking his heart, but I had no better alternative. *Ankit had to move on . . .*

What I did next is the hardest thing I've ever done. It was more like a string of hard things . . . first I met his eyes and said unblinkingly, my tone soft at first but getting harsher with every word, "I don't love you Ankit. I never have, I never will. I ain't sure what is going on between me and Ronit, but I intend to find out. And soon. In the meantime, I want to be left alone. I have never been a person who wanted or needed human company. And rude as it may sound, you have been imposing on my privacy for way too long. I need my space . . . I need my life back. It has been more than four years, *get over me already*. Get a life. And stop interfering in mine."

As he nodded silently, I had to see the look on his face, and it broke my heart. He was hurt. I hated myself for causing it.

And apart from the obvious anger and hurt, he seemed *disappointed*.

Then I made him drive me back home. I chose to sit in the backseat and adjusted the rearview mirror such that we couldn't see each other. I held back tears threatening to flood my eyes, so that Ankit doesn't realise it was a sham.

We didn't exchange a single word in the drive that took an eternity to come to an end.

When he parked outside my house, I silently got out of the car and left, without sparing a glance at him.

I left the flowers behind.

DECEMBER

Chat-26

Sabbatical

December 10th, 2010

The first ten days of December went by without me exchanging a single word with either Ankit or Ronit.

At Dasham, sitting at the rock, holding a bunch of roses, the first flower I'd ever received, my feelings had been in frenzy. I had

convinced myself I was in love with Ronit and that I did not love Ankit, but as soon as Ankit expressed his love for me and asked for a response, I panicked. I had been confused, unsure and frustrated.

I was torn between Ankit and Ronit. Between my inability to understand my obsession for Ronit and craving to have a *real* relationship with Ankit, who loved me so much, I couldn't understand what to do. So, on surface I feigned nonchalance and shrugged Ankit's proposal away.

After getting home, I had cried nonstop for hours at an end. It was the first time I cried after my father's funeral.

In the ten days I spent at home, I'd expected to get an insight to the whole situation. I didn't.

In those ten days, I took bath only thrice. Once when I spent three days straight in the same clothes and Maa forced me to take bath or *no food*. Once when Maa agreed to never watch 'Pyar Ki Ye Ek Kahaani' (a *BAD* TV serial adaptation of The Twilight Saga, which if Stephenie Meyer makes a mistake to watch, she'd be forced to commit suicide, in case she doesn't die of sheer shock. *Edward had fangs* and became a vampire only at full moons. WTF!) again, and once, when I was in a mood to.

All I did was watch The Bachelor whenever the match wasn't on. Five ODIs were held between India and New Zealand in those ten days. I watched all of them religiously. Not that it was highly gripping, with India being a much better team. In fact, the entire series was one-sided; we won it by 5-0. By the time it ended, I could name all the sponsors of the series and ended up developing a minor crush at Gambhir.

I wished I had college to pass time with, but one-month-long preparation leave was going on. We had the fifth semester end-semester exams from 29th December up to 11th January. Who schedules exams at the peak of winters? It is the time of the year when I go into hibernation! Aarrghh.

I hadn't logged into FB since the last ten days and when I did, it suddenly struck me that Ronit must be back in India. And he was online too, just like he always was.

Vatsala: Hey . . .
Ronit: Hey!
Vatsala: How does it feel?
Ronit: Being back?
Vatsala: Yeah . . .
Ronit: Good! :) :)
Hey, brb

Be right back, he had said, not ttyl or g2g. That lifted my mood a little.

However, I didn't wait. I wasn't in a mood to chat with him.

Definitely a first.

I bid him goodbye, logged out quickly and dialled Ankit's number. I wasn't sure what I would've said, had he taken any of my calls. When he didn't, I called Rohan.

"Hello."

"Rohan?"

"Yes."

"Is Ankit there?"

"Let me see," he said and put me on hold. He retrieved the call moments later and said, "He's asleep. He had a killer headache."

"He asked you to say so?"

"Yes."

"Hmmm . . . tell me something, Rohan . . . is he okay?"

"As in?"

"Just generally . . ."

"I guess so. He has been acting a little weird though . . ."

"Weird?"

"He never stays at home anymore. It seems like he's enjoying his life a lot, if you know what I mean."

"Oh," was all I said before hanging up. I didn't know what he meant and I wasn't sure I even wanted to know.

I had put myself in jail for ten long days to try and figure out my feelings. But it wasn't until after the call that the realisation dawned upon me – I was in love with two guys, at the same time.

Jaanvi's observation, that I was in deep shit, made even more sense now.

The crush I'd had on Ronit had blown out of proportions. Big time. From minor to major, it had then turned into love, followed by obsession and had promptly gotten converted into madness by then. It was one thing being attracted to someone and another being *devoted* to him. He was someone I looked up to, someone I wanted to be like. He was also the first guy I'd flirted with, the only guy who made me want to fall in love.

He was a dream.

And Ankit was someone I genuinely loved. Despite our personalities being in complete contrast with each other, I had bonded with him in our very first meeting and he'd never left my side, always being with me through thick and thins. His caring and thoughtful nature never failed to make me feel loved. I liked spending time with him, and lately, a lot.

He was my rock.

I just wished I had Jaanvi with me then, but she was caught up in her own crazy love life; she and Nilaap were starting to have troubles.

So, by the end of the day, the only thing I was sure about was that I was in love with two guys.

Now, *if only I could decide whom I loved more . . .*

Chat-27

Die-hard Fan

December 14th, 2010

Ronit was the one. There wasn't a single doubt clouding my mind anymore. I agree that he probably didn't know me, but I wasn't unknown to him either. I meant something to him. He gave me a reason to believe so, by Tagging me in his new Note, *No Love Lost-No Love Found*.

I initiated the Chat.

Vatsala: Hey!!
Ronit: Hi :)
Vatsala: You tagged me in a note?
Ronit: Yeah :) :)
Vatsala: :D
Ronit: I hope you like it though
Vatsala: Reading . . .
Ronit: Fingers crossed!

I quickly went through his Note and was taken by surprise. Although I'd been Ronit's biggest fan for quite some time, amazingly, that was the first time I was reading something written by him. Sure, he'd been blogging since the last five years and his blogs were kind of famous too, but blogs weren't my thing. They never interested me. Who'd like to read about a bunch of people who wrote about anything mildly interesting (and sometimes unbelievably boring!) going on in their lives? They seemed like personal diaries of lonely people – who have no one to talk to – to me!

So after reading Ronit's Note, I was amazed by how little I knew him. In my mind I'd projected him as someone he clearly wasn't. He turned out to be a hopeless romantic who was into all that gooey and gross stuff.

And to my intense astonishment, it made me like him even more! Was there anything he could do which I wouldn't like anymore?

Once Akansha was teasing me because of that little idol worship thing I did of a certain Ronit Oberoi, and I'd replied quite simply with, "If you're a fan, be die-hard, else what's the use?" Of course, she'd made fun of me, but it did nothing to lower my degree of loyalty to Ronit. I wasn't joking when I said I worshipped the ground he walked on.

Vatsala: It's sooo cute :)
Makes me want to fall in love!!
Ronit: Hehe! Thankuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu! :)

Twenty-five 'u's, I counted. My take on his Note mattered to him? I was getting more and more hopeful.

Vatsala: Pleasure!
Ronit: :) :)

He was using a lot of smileys that day. Good sign?

Vatsala: I'm still getting over the fact that you found me worthy enough to tag me in your note!!
SO HAPPY right now!
Ronit: You were the first person I thought of after people I knew in real life to tag! :) :)
Vatsala: OMG!! I'm gonna tell all my friends! They'll envy me bad!

No, I wasn't going to tell anyone. I had only two friends and I knew for a fact that none of them would take the news kindly. And Akansha was also Tagged, so no use telling her. I did copy-paste the entire Chat with Ronit and send it to her as a Message, though. Just like I always did.

Ronit: C'mon! :) Stop embarrassing me!
Vatsala: OK. No more flattery! You'll miss it soon, though!
Ronit: Hehe! Yeah, friends don't flatter each other :)
Vatsala: Point taken ;)

First lull point. Vatsala, think of something to keep the conversation going.

Vatsala: See, again . . . I logged into FB and the first thing that came up on my homepage was 'Ronit Oberoi is now friends with Fatima Mirza and 53 other people'!!!

Ronit: Hehe! :P :P Never mind, some day it will all finish off!
Vatsala: Must be nice, na? People fawning over you all the time?
Ronit: I don't take all this seriously! It will all end as soon as I stop jockeying/ get fired!
So I just find it amusing! :) :)

Sometimes he acted so humble that I wanted to kick his freaking ass! Come on dude, you're human!

Vatsala: Yeah, we Indians are quick to make people stars! But the stardom doesn't last long.
NOT IN YOUR CASE! You'll be a star forever! :P :P
Ronit: Blah! I give it two more years and it'll blow over! :) :)

Enough! Stop acting all virtuous!

Vatsala: Not for me! And you can always anchor another show!
Ronit: It can suck!
Vatsala: Yeah, but it won't. No one can make you feel inferior without your consent!

I'd read that sentence somewhere. Perhaps some Princess Diaries book. (Yes, I once used to read all that. Ahem.)

Ronit: But it can genuinely suck without me thinking so! :P
Vatsala: Oh, what am I here for then? I can make you feel good about yourself anytime!
Flattery and all . . . :P
Ronit: Haha! :P :P I will count on that! :P
Vatsala: :D

Another dead-end. I like people who actually make an effort to keep the conversation alive. Hey, wait a minute . . . did I just say that? Just a few months back I was someone who went offline if someone initiated Chat and got annoyed whenever she received an SMS. I was a loner and was staunchly antisocial.

But then, Ronit had always been an exception to all my rules. Even my huge ego-issues vanished when it came to him. I'd never been so damn talkative in front of anyone! I mean, I kept sending him Messages even though he chose to ignore them ninety percent of the time. Where did my self-esteem go?

What the hell is happening to me?

Vatsala: Hey, are you in love or what?
Ronit: Not really!
Vatsala: So what was the note all about?
Ronit: I just have a crush on somebody I wouldn't get involved with!
Ah! Crush. Crushes are bad, ask me!
Vatsala: Oh, thank God! I thought you were committed!!
Ronit: Naah! Naah! :P

Vatsala: I can still flirt then! ;) ;)
Ronit: And what if someday I start going out with someone?
The attention will stop? :(That's mean! :/

Attention? Interesting word to describe what I'd been doing for over three months now!

Vatsala: Aww . . . trust me, I won't give up!
Ronit: Hehe! :P :P Now I like it! :) :) :)

Grinning like an idiot. I SO loved him!

Vatsala: :D :P

Yet another lull. I didn't want the Chat to end just yet. I thought I was ready to talk Heavy Metal. One month was a lot of time to become a Metal fan, especially for a music lover like me.

Vatsala: So you like metal music . . .
Ronit: NOT AT ALL!! My friend uploaded fake info about me in my profile!!
Vatsala: Oh

I come across very many moments in my life when I get speechless. But the word 'oh' always manages to get out!

So that's how all the pains I'd gone through to make myself like 'his type of music' went down the drain. Metal has a tendency to hurt your ears when you're new to it.

Vatsala: What kind of music do you like then?
Ronit: I listen to Akon and Black Eyed Peas!

WHAT? I, who was a big fan of Rock and Rap, had started listening to Metal for him and he

turned out to be a fan of Pop and Hip hop? *You've gotta be kidding me.*

Conversation. Concentrate on the conversation, Vatsala. There was one plus point, though. . .

Vatsala: Hehe! I was wondering how someone could like Snoop Dogg and Lil Wayne!!

Ronit: Actually . . . I do like those two!

Another 'oh' moment. All was going well, why did I have to ruin it? It was the best Chat I'd had with Ronit in *ages*.

That Chat – one of my very favourites till date. . . the ones I still remember with a feeling of nostalgia – had lasted for a little over an hour and by the end of it, I was sure of three things.

First, I was in love with whatever I had with Ronit and I wasn't going to let it go.

Second, I somehow had to make Ankit understand how much Ronit meant to me.

And third, I'd have to find more things in common with Ronit to have something interesting to talk about.

When I clicked on the 'See Relationship' option on FB, the only two things that popped up as our similar interests were F.R.I.E.N.D.S. and How I Met Your Mother. For all I know, he might be a bigger F.R.I.E.N.D.S. fan! Disaster!

That was unacceptable. We just had to have more in common with each other. I resolved to make it happen, making a mental note, *this time, I'll confirm with him before 'trying to like' stuff of his choice*.

Chat-28

Blood & Bones

December 16th, 2010

This time when Ronit Liked some of my Photos, I sent him a Message saying 'thanks' just out of habit. His 'most welcome' that I received moments later must've been out of habit too! So, all the conversation we had that day consisted of our customary exchange of thanks and welcome. And that was it.

To tell the truth, I was looking positively dreadful in those pictures. I wondered why I added them on FB in the first place. But what I really dwelled upon was how come he Liked such terrible photos of me? Did I look good even in my terrible pictures? (I know, I know. I was just wondering!) Was he trying to start a conversation?

The ringing of my cell phone interrupted the string of rather wishful thoughts!

"Heya!" I greeted Jaanvi.

"We're going out."

"Where?"

"There's a party. Come quickly. I'm waiting outside your house."

"Now?" It was 2 p.m.

"Yes. You've got two minutes."

In those two minutes, I changed out of my PJs to put on some jeans and a freshly laundered Tee, grabbed a jacket, pulled on my sneakers and combed my hair. That was all I could do in the name of getting-ready-for-a-party.

"We broke up," Jaanvi disclosed casually when I got in her car.

"*What?*"

"Nilaap and I aren't together anymore."

"Why? What happened?" *How the hell was she so calm? Was she doing drugs? Should she drive in such a condition?*

"It wasn't working out."

"Aarrghh! Are you ever going to tell? Stop walking around in circles."

"He was getting too possessive about me. He had problems with me talking to Ankit. He thought

there was something ‘going on’ between the two of us.”

“*He said that?*”

She nodded. “He believed dancing was an excuse I used to ‘fool around’ with Ankit.”

“How sick!”

“That bastard.”

“What a scumbag.”

“That bloody mother-fucking son-of-a-bitch.”

I couldn’t believe Jaanvi just said that. For someone who had problem saying the F-word alone . . . teaming it with ‘mother’? *Progress.* She must be really angry.

“You didn’t tell him the truth?”

“I did. And after a lot of convincing, he did say he trusted me. But then, just moments later, he said, ‘So you don’t mind if I join you guys in your dance practices?’ That was it. I dumped him.”

We stayed silent for a while and then I asked the most pressing question on my mind, “Are you okay? Don’t you miss him or anything? I mean, you guys were close . . .”

“Close? He was suffocating me. That guy has major insecurity issues, I tell you,” she burst out.

“Are you okay?” I asked again.

“I guess. I’m a free-bird now. We’re celebrating!” she cheered.

“What? You mean this is the party you are taking me to? Your break-up party?”

“Yes! It’d be so much fun!”

She was high on something, I was sure. Break-up parties happened only in movies, not in real life! I crossed my fingers and prayed silently that we don’t meet an accident on our way.

Everyone was there. Praveen, Evita (I wonder why I always end up taking their names together!), Nalini, Shruti, Viyali, a few people I didn’t know, a few people I didn’t remember the names of and . . . Ankit, of course.

That was the first time we were seeing each other after that Dasham Fiasco. I should’ve known he’d be there; he’s a good friend. Even if it meant coming face to face with me, he wouldn’t back out from being there for Jaanvi.

For the three hours that the party lasted, we sat facing each other, less than ten feet apart, but didn’t exchange a sole word. Our eyes did meet about two thousand times, though.

He wasn’t wearing anything fancy that day, just a blue sweatshirt with blue jeans, but still managed to look ravishing.

What is wrong with me? I Chat with Ronit, I fall in love. I look at Ankit, I fall in love. I’ve turned into a freaking pendulum.

When, mercifully, the party ended, someone suggested a long drive. *Vella* that we always were, we all agreed. We had one car, seven bikes and two scootys. Jaanvi gave the car to Praveen and Evita, who feared being seen together by someone who knew their parents, or worse, their parents themselves.

Jaanvi joined Ankit on his bike and I joined Viyali on his.

We went to Hinoo, which was one of the most calm and serene areas of Ranchi. Apart from having butter-smooth roads, which were usually quite deserted, it also presented a beautiful sight, with trees surrounding the roads.

Once there, we stopped at roadside to see the sunset. I had never been attracted to natural beauty and other masterpieces of His creation, but even I have to agree that the scene was quite astonishing.

Soon after the sunset, the street lights were turned on and everybody started their bikes for one last round. Praveen, Evita and Jaanvi’s car had gone missing for some time by then. In fact, they never

made it to Hinoo.

“I want to drive,” I told Viyali as he started his bike.

“Are you sure?”

“Damn right I’m sure!”

“Alright.” He parked by the side of the road and we switched places.

“Hold this,” I said and handed over my handbag to him. I’d started carrying one recently, after I’d made the transformation into *girl* type of a girl.

“Be careful, it’s heavy,” Viyali warned. He owned a Yamaha FZ-16, which I’d always fancied driving but hadn’t got a chance until then.

“I can handle this, Viyali. Chill. I’ve driven a Pulsar and a Unicorn before.” I took pride in the fact.

“Okay.”

“Just tell me when to change gears.”

“Sure.”

It took me two tries to make the bike move. (The whole releasing of clutch and accelerating simultaneously business takes some getting used to.)

“Gear,” Viyali said.

“Wow!” I exclaimed. “I thought Pulsar was the best bike ever. But this is pure pleasure to drive. Your bike is *makkhan*!”

“It’s the best!”

“Most definitely,” I gained confidence as I started enjoying more and more. The trouble came – all too soon – when we reached the first turn.

“Viyali, they’re all turning.”

“Turn the handle slowly . . .”

I’d been driving my scooty for five years and was taught driving a bicycle about fifteen years ago. So turning the handle was pretty basic a task. But right then, at that moment, *I just couldn’t*.

Oh, and I forgot to mention, I have a tendency to *accelerate* when I panic while driving. We were moving at a speed of 50 km/hr. It might not be a high speed generally, but for a girl driving an FZ-16 for the first time, it could lead to disasters. And it did.

“I can’t.”

“Gear down, gear down, don’t accelerate.”

How do we change gears? Do I press it from above or lift it from below? “Viyali, *I can’t!* What do I do?”

“Go straight. Don’t turn, *go straight*.”

But I couldn’t do that either. In my efforts to make the turn, I had turned the handle a little. So now we were neither turning, nor going straight. We were heading straight to a one foot high cement structure built at the side of the road (where people used to sit and talk for hours to pass time). I thanked God there wasn’t anyone sitting there then.

Brake, my mind screamed at me. There was a little sand on the road, so applying disc brake would result in skidding.

When you’re accustomed to driving a scooty, you are also accustomed to applying brakes by hand. And then, when you start driving bikes, people remind you a million times *not* to use disc brakes. And when you get nervous, you forget which leg to use to apply brakes.

I used left.

“Viyali, *Viyali*, *VIYALI*!” I screamed in alarm.

We hit straight into the cement structure. I was thrown off forward and fell face down roughly ten feet ahead of where the bike lay. Viyali, who was thrown forward, too, landed a couple of feet ahead of me.

As I raised my face to spit out the mud and blood, I heard brakes shrieking, my friends shouting, everyone jumping off moving bikes and running towards us, abandoning their vehicles and handbags.

As it always happens after accidents, I felt disoriented. One moment, I was on my bike and in the next, lying face down on ground (dirty ground, at that. I had mud and grass all over me!). It all happened in a jiffy.

"Not my hand," I groaned as someone tried to pull me up by my arm. "It hurts . . ."

Praveen and Evita chose that blessed moment to reappear and Ankit carried me to the car and drove me to the hospital.

The wrist of my right arm had swollen to twice its size in no time (my *right* arm. We had exams!) and I had ruined Jaanvi's car seat with all that blood. My new jeans!

"Viyali . . ." I murmured.

"He's okay. Nothing happened to him," Jaanvi answered.

And it was true. When I looked out of the car window, I saw everyone driving by our side or behind us. and amazingly, Viyali was not only sitting on his now-a-little-tattered bike, looking good as new, without a single scratch on his body, *he was even driving*.

Till then, I'd been thinking that I'd killed him. Was it his ghost? Will it haunt me forever for taking his life?

Two hours later, I was lying on Jaanvi's bed. I hadn't been able to build up enough courage to inform my mother of the accident, so I'd used studies as an excuse to stay at Jaanvi's place for the night.

I wished the accident had been more severe. I'd never been admitted to a hospital for anything and the idea fascinated me! And the blood . . . you already know about my affinity to it! So you can imagine my disappointment when the doctors let me go after applying a crepe bandage on my arm and dressing the major and minor wounds that spanned throughout the left half of my body.

"It is nothing serious," the doc had said. "Her right wrist has a hairline fracture that, if taken proper care of, will heal in about a couple of weeks and the other wounds will be fine in less than a week." *Damn! Unlucky me!*

"I'm sorry," Viyali said. He had been saying that repeatedly since the last two hours. Did that mean his ghost wouldn't haunt me? Or was there a hidden ulterior motive . . . like plotting a sinister conspiracy behind the façade of innocence?

"For the last time – it wasn't your fault. You didn't do anything," I replied.

"I should have done something. But I was engaged holding your handbag . . ." he said and we all burst out laughing.

Before leaving, he turned to me and said, "You know, I purposefully dived over you to land a little ahead of you. I was trying not to fall upon you . . . All that I had on my mind at that time was an image from a football match I witnessed at my school, where a senior fell upon a junior and the poor boy ended up having three broken bones!"

"You saved my life! How can I ever pay you back?" I laughed.

After a while, everyone left and it was just Jaanvi, Ankit and I in the room. We all looked at each other.

"Er . . . I'll go . . . I'll see about . . . dinner and . . . um . . . see off Nalini . . . Oh, what the hell! I'll just leave you guys alone," a pink faced Jaanvi said before leaving.

I looked at Ankit and met his eye.

"Thank you," I whispered.

For the first time that day, I saw a genuine smile light up his face. "Take care," he said, shaking his head and smiling, as if mocking me at my stupidity.

All too soon, he was gone. I missed him instantaneously.

Seriously, *what* is wrong with me?

Chat-29

Cold & Heartless

December 21st, 2010

To think that I had just six months left with Ankit was unbearable.

In the last few days, he had been immensely caring and understanding. In all the time he had spent with me, he didn't bring up Ronit or Dasham matter even once. It was as if the whole episode had been nothing but a result of my active imagination.

Yet, there was something . . .

"I love him, don't I?" I asked Jaanvi right after Ankit left.

I had returned home the day after the accident. No, I did not tell Maa what actually had transpired. We made up another plausible excuse to explain the bandaged arm. I don't think she believed me, though; school teachers can almost *smell* if there's something fishy! It's kind of *creepy*!

However, she didn't prod. That was mostly because she didn't know about the wounds on the rest of my body. We kept it well hidden. My arm could get stuck in a rusty elevator's door, but how could I justify the scratches at other parts of my body? I was stuck in an elevator with a wildcat, which scratched me all over my body and my arm twisted in the elevator door when I tried to escape? Even a four-year-old would see through that! (Worse, he'd never stop laughing whenever he sees you again!)

So to keep the wounds a secret, Jaanvi had stayed at my place for the next four nights, helping me fake normalcy. Blue-green patches of blood clot had made appearances all over my body and I was finding it incredibly challenging to even walk without limping.

Jaanvi had offered to help and once again, we had used studies as an excuse when our parents had raised eyebrows. They always buy the group-study story!

Ankit visited twice everyday to see how I was doing.

"Huh?" Jaanvi asked.

"I love Ankit."

"Finally! I thought you'd never realise!"

"You know I suck at this emotional stuff. But . . ."

"But?"

"I'd been confused between Ronit and Ankit for such a long time . . . but now that I think of it, I feel *why was I even considering Ronit?*"

"Exactly!"

"Shut up. Let me speak."

"Okay, go on."

"I don't know Ronit, I finally accept it. Even though I like to imagine him as the best kind of human being possible, the truth is – *I don't know*. For all I know, he might have around five girlfriends, three secret marriages, alliance with the dons at Dubai, criminal record and is into some really nasty sex stuff."

"Wow. Interesting thought!"

I glared at her to shut her up. "And even if he is pure as milk, I have no idea what kind of a person he is. I don't know what he likes to do in his free time or . . ." I trailed off.

"What?" Jaanvi probed.

"Again. Why am I talking about Ronit? Why on earth am I so damn obsessed with him?"

"Beats me."

"Ankit . . . he said at Dasham . . . he said 'it might as well be my last chance . . .' It made me think. We have just six months left with each other. *What will I do after that?* What if we go to different cities and he forgets all about me? What if he finds someone who loves him as much as he loves me? When I go to Mumbai, what am I going to do? I will be all alone. I'll never be able to make friends . . . and once he has a girlfriend, he won't have time for me. He won't be able to talk to me every time I'm in a crisis. I won't be able to meet him everyday . . . I won't have him to help me out of my self-inflicted messes . . . I won't be able to see him dance, or see him

glare angrily when people stare at me or pass comments . . . I won't have him. Period."

Jaanvi was looking at me in a very odd way.

"Is it love?" I asked her.

"Will you miss me as much as you'll miss him?"

I didn't have to think about that. "No," I replied. *Not even close.*

She smiled. "Yes sweetie, this is love!"

"Don't call me that."

"Whatever."

I let out a breath. "So, this is it? This is what love actually feels like?"

"Depends on what you're feeling."

"Pain. I hurt him, Jaanvi. And I hurt him *very* badly. I won't be able to make it up to him . . . and we'll move to different cities in sometime . . ."

"Okay, first of all – you have hurt him bad, yeah. But sweet that he is, he has already forgiven you for that. He knows you didn't mean it. And secondly – you don't necessarily need to move to different cities."

"How?"

"Mumbai has some pretty awesome B-schools. I'm sure he'll get into a superb one."

My heart felt lighter. "But that'll come later. What if he rejects my proposal like I rejected his? So many times . . ."

"That might be a problem," Jaanvi chuckled.

"And I'll have to plan a romantic way . . ." I wondered.

"I thought I'd have to flirt with Ankit to make you jealous so that you realise how much you love him. I suggested a plan to him too, but he didn't agree . . ."

"You're almost as crazy as me."

"Aww . . . am I getting better?" she asked and we laughed.

I sighed. "What was I thinking? I mean he was there, right in front of me, for four and a half years now . . . and I shrugged off his feelings because he didn't like Eminem that much! Am I insane?"

"That you are."

"Hey, I bash myself doesn't mean you get to bash me too!"

"Okay. Let's change the topic. Ronit."

"What about him?"

"Speak about him now. I'm enjoying listening to you being amazed at your own stupidity."

"I wasn't stupid. I was confused."

"Yeah yeah! So, how do you feel about him now?"

"I'm not sure. I just feel *something* for him. That something isn't love, I'm sure. Maybe celebrity stalking feels like this! I just . . . I like chatting with him . . . but then, I like chatting with my pillow too. Doesn't mean I'm in love with it," I said. "At least not romantically!" I added as an afterthought.

"So you'll stop chatting with him from now?"

"Do I have to?"

"You can't have everything!"

"Hmmm . . . okay, I'll stop trying to make something happen."

"Thank God! I thought you were going to go the *Paparazzi* way!"

"What?"

"Lady Gaga's song – *I'm your biggest fan, I'll follow you until you love me . . .*"

"Shut up! I wasn't doing that." I was.

"You were!"

"You can't blame me for that! It's a known fact that no matter how many decent guys we're surrounded with, we girls *always* opt for bad guys. They have this certain charm . . . an air of authority about them, that's so mouth-wateringly sexy. Supremely irresistible!"

Jaanvi nodded her head vigorously in agreement. "Totally!"

"But, anyway, my point is that now that I've come back to my senses, I realise . . . I don't want to have a boyfriend who shouts back equally loud at me when I get upset and flip out!"

"And you love Ankit," she reminded me.

"Oh yes! That too," I grinned sheepishly.

She laughed. "So, you're finally over Ronit now!"

"I guess! I haven't logged in even once in these five days. Which reminds me, I told you to send him a Message telling about the accident. Did you?"

"Er . . . yes . . ."

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I have something to tell you. Don't be angry . . ."

"What? You sent him another silly Message from my Account, didn't you?"

"Not exactly 'silly' . . ."

"What is it?" I was getting anxious.

"Let me explain first. I thought you'd need my help in realising that he doesn't care about you . . . so I sent him a Message to test . . . he did reply, but he didn't seem *concerned* . . ."

"Show me," I demanded. So, he didn't care about me. Big deal. Bike accidents weren't all that lethal.

Vatsala: I think I killed someone . . . I'm not sure . . . it couldn't have been that fatal, but there was so much blood. . . and I didn't have any choice . . . the alternative was getting raped/murdered. I had to do something to escape.

I have told no one. I don't know whom to tell. I don't want to involve police. I'm very scared. I can't sleep. The guilt, fear, pain . . .

Ronit: Chill out. He will get what he deserves . . .

Vatsala: Trust me, it isn't all that easy. Every time the thought that I might've been murdered, or worse, raped last night crosses my mind . . . I'm so freaked. It isn't easy to forget . . . especially after the cuts and bruises he gave me. :'(

"He didn't reply to that," Jaanvi said softly.

Tears immediately filled my eyes. To think that I told him that *that* happened to me and he didn't care enough to reply . . .

I would've replied even if some stranger sent me a Message like that.

"Why did you do that?" I cried.

"I just . . . I didn't think he'd be *so* indifferent. He didn't even ask what exactly happened . . . or about you . . . he didn't ask how you were doing, even when he knew he was the only one who knows about . . . he didn't even . . ."

"And I thought I loved him!"

Jaanvi hugged me. "Don't cry. He's not worth it," she said, exactly what every friend says that after their friend's break-up.

But I just kept crying. Illusions are odd. They make you believe something and when the truth comes out, they break your heart.

Ronit had given me reasons to believe that I meant something to him. When the time came when I (supposedly) needed him the most, he turned a deaf ear.

The term *fair-weathered friend* suddenly crossed my mind.

Gosh! Why did I suck so bad at judging people?

"I don't care that the Message was a sham . . . he has proved himself as the biggest jerk ever."

"Seconded."

"I should've listened to him when he said he was *cold and heartless*."

Chat-30

Light Bulb

December 28th, 2010

"Bloody hell," I let out. *How is this even possible?* I called Jaanvi up.

"Hello."

"It got selected."

"What got selected?"

"I got a mail. Express Publications accepted the manuscript."

“*What?*”

On the night when Ronit proved himself as a cold and heartless jerk, caught between a jumble of alien emotions, I’d said, “I can write a book about this,” to which Jaanvi had reacted with, “Sure, titled: Love @ Facebook!”

Two days later, I’d made Jaanvi type the sample three chapters and a synopsis of our story. My arm hardly in working condition, I’d spent the entire day thinking and dictating while Jaanvi had been kind enough to follow my weird request and type. I suspected she was enjoying it too, though she kept saying things like, ‘*Why are we doing this, again?’*

At 11 p.m. on 24th December, we hit the send button. We hadn’t expected an acceptance, let alone so soon.

“It’s insane, isn’t it?”

“You’re kidding me! How can they accept *that*? And so soon. 25th was Christmas and 26th a Sunday. At what time did you receive their mail today?”

“1 p.m.”

“So you’re saying they accepted it in *four hours*?”

“I’m as shocked as you.”

We expressed our disbelief for quite some time. We ruled out the chances that the publishers might be working from home and selected our manuscript in two days’ time. Four hours seemed *way* more impressive! After a lot of shrieking and laughing, the gravity of the situation hit us. *I had to write that book now.*

I mean, I, Vatsala Rathore, had to actually write a book about . . . what, exactly? Even the thought of writing something that was even remotely romantic . . . Oh, man! What have I gotten myself into this time!

“What are you going to do?”

“I have no idea. I didn’t seriously think, even for a minute that I’d actually have to write such a book someday.”

“Oh God! You’re going to be a writer!”

“Maybe. Right now, though, come over quickly. I’ll call Ankit too. We need to study. I don’t want to flunk tomorrow’s exam.”

We spent the rest of the day studying together. By the time Ankit stood up to leave, Jaanvi had dozed off. I went to see him to the door.

“What would I do without you?” I said.

“Ah! You’ll find a way,” he smiled.

“I have strong doubts relating that.”

He raised his eyebrows.

You’ll know. Soon. I shook my head and smiled, “See you.”

“Good night.”

When I returned to my room, Jaanvi wasn’t sleeping anymore. She was up and *chatting.* From my Account. *With Ronit.*

Vatsala: You won’t believe what happened!

Ronit: What?

“What are you doing?” I asked Jaanvi.

“Telling him about your novel.”

“Why?”

“Maybe he’ll help.”

“Like he helped when I asked him about video-jockeying?”

“You can’t blame him for not being able to keep track of personal lives of each one of thousands of his fans.”

I knew she was right, but I was still angry. “Whose side are you on?”

She ignored me and continued chatting. After a while, she murmured, “You need an ending . . .”

I thought about that. “No, I need two endings,” I said as I closed my eyes to sleep, leaving Jaanvi to Chat with Ronit in my name.

I didn’t ask what they talked about that night. I wasn’t interested anymore.

Chat-31

The Beginning

December 31st, 2010 & New Year 2011

"I need something red. This won't do," I said, throwing the dress Jaanvi had asked me to try on the bed.

"And you're saying this now? What were you doing since the last three days?" Jaanvi shot back.

Good question. Since the last three days, I had been trying to be absolutely sure that I wasn't making a mistake this time and Ankit really was *the one*. By the end of the third day, I didn't have a single shred of doubt.

Especially given that I didn't have the whole Ronit business to confuse me this time. To some extent, I was even grateful to Ronit's indifference. For the last couple of months, I had been falling in love with Ronit every time I chatted with him and with Ankit every time I met him. Now that I was in love with Ankit and had resolved not to chat with Ronit ever again, the decision got infinitely simpler.

So, all I had to do was take care not to chat with Ronit and forget him eventually. With Ankit by my side it'd be several times easier.

And anyway, I was royally pissed off at Ronit, so . . . Hey no, let's not talk about him now. This is the only chapter of this book that doesn't have a chat between Ronit and me.

I had planned to propose Ankit that night and was hoping he doesn't reject it as a way of getting back at me. But I couldn't afford letting such negative thoughts cloud my mood. *I had to look good that night* – that was my primary concern.

"I'm serious, Jaanvi. I need red."

"It's already nine o' clock. We have just two hours. How are we supposed to arrange a red dress so quickly?"

"Nalini! Let's call her. Or Shruti."

But just as luck would have it, Nalini wasn't in the town and Shruti had already left for her party. Help came from the most unexpected source – Evita. For once in her life, she wasn't busy with Praveen as he was caught up in a hospital, owing to his sister's bad health.

Selfish you might call me, but I thanked God for making Praveen's sister sick at the right time.

However, Evita was being overly generous to me since the last few days. The only three people who had offered to complete my assignments (that I was unable to do because of the fracture) were Ankit, Jaanvi and Evita. Although all that needed to be done was doing a little copy-paste from Wikipedia and getting prints, no one else came forward to offer help. *Times like this make you realise who your true friends are.*

Evita got to my place by ten o' clock with two red dresses, both of which were equally stunning. I ran to her and hugged her, "You're my best friend ever."

Jaanvi raised her eyebrows. I bit the tip of my tongue.

"Let's get you ready now," Evita said and both the girls started trying to make me look fractionally more beautiful.

Together, they took less than fifteen minutes to get me ready. They were surprised by how well the dresses fit me. They wondered where all that food I eat goes. What they didn't know was that God has blessed me with the best virtue ever – I can eat all I want and never gain a pound. I love God!

"Let's go," Jaanvi said at last.

Maa seemed quite apprehensive seeing the three of us 'going to a party,' I wearing a dress complete with make-up and stilettos and the other two girls dressed in jeans.

"I lost a bet and they forced me to dress up like a clown," was the best excuse I could come up with. Damn, I was getting bad at lying!

We had chosen the terrace of Ankit's house as our venue because (a) Ankit's parents were out of town, sanctioning us the much needed privacy and (b) quite frankly, his terrace garden was *beautiful*. His mother, apart from cooking deliciously, also had a keen interest in gardening. Good for me!

We reached Ankit's place and Jaanvi used the stolen key to open the lock. (How we stole the key is a story we shall keep for some other time). We knew no one would be home as Rohan must be busy with his girlfriend, as always, Ankit was at Gymkhana Club, waiting for us as planned and as I said before; their parents were out of town.

We let ourselves in and flipped on the lights.

"What the—" Rohan shouted.

We stared at each other for a minute and said in unison, "What are you doing here?"

"I . . . I . . ." Rohan stammered. What he had been doing was quite obvious, considering the flustered look on his face, the half-naked girl who ran to another room and some items of her clothing lying on the floor. "Don't tell Ankit *bhaiya*," he pleaded.

I nodded, hardly being able to hide my amusement. "Just make yourself scarce, I'll be on the roof."

"Okay," he said before picking up his girlfriend's clothes and exiting the room.

"And Rohan?"

"Yes?"

"Give me your PSP!"

Jaanvi and Evita gave me looks.

"What?" I asked. "Angry Birds is the only game I need just my left thumb to play!"

,,,

The weather was chilly. *Chilly.* (I later came to know that it was the coldest night of that winter). I was frozen. It had been an hour since Jaanvi and Evita had left, promising to send Ankit to me ASAP.

What if he doesn't come? I was getting anxious.

I looked around myself. Jaanvi was excellent at decorating things, I have to give that to her. Even though we had to replace the candles with torches (we hadn't taken the breeze into account), the place was looking picture perfect.

We had arranged everything – music playing softly from the small speakers we'd connected to my Walkman, take-away dinner from Ankit's favourite Chinese restaurant (Jaanvi didn't let me order chicken), a small chocolate cake (Jaanvi didn't let me order Black Forrest) and a bottle of SULA champagne (I planned on intoxicating him to take advantage of his drunken state) completed the arrangement.

Jaanvi had even gone through additional pains to decorate the setting with flowers and candles. Although, the flowers got lost somewhere amongst those already blooming in the garden and the candles were rendered useless owing to the blowing wind.

In the light of the two torches we'd been able to find at the last moment, the place looked perfect.

Almost; Ankit wasn't there to complete the picture.

Angry Birds lost its charm, the cool breeze started to feel too freezing, the dinner had turned cold, the torch-light dimmed and the music started to seem too slow and too sad.

I checked the time. 12:03 a.m.

Time to celebrate.

I opened the champagne bottle with a little difficulty (the seal and the cork were a bit tricky). I didn't bother to pour the drink into a glass and took a swig directly from the bottle. And spit it out instantly; it tasted *bad*.

I got up to change the music. When you get used to metal, pop seems like something from your naïve and innocent childhood.

What if Ankit didn't come at all? I know that was the kind of treatment I deserved . . . what if he realises the same and decides I wasn't worth giving a chance.

It was 1 a.m. when tears made their first appearance. Before leaving, Jaanvi had asked, "Anything else?" to which I had replied, "Is this eye make-up waterproof? I don't want to smudge my eyes . . . I have a strange feeling that I'll cry tonight."

Jaanvi had just smiled and said, "I'm sure the tears would be out of happiness."

"And the make-up is waterproof, don't worry. Just make sure not to rub your eyes!" Evita had added.

So that gave me a license to cry. Even if I ended up looking like a ghost, who was there to see me?

The song changed to Fear of The Dark and goose bumps appeared almost immediately on my bare arms. (I wasn't wearing a jacket; I was trying to freeze myself to death. Life wasn't worth living anymore).

I got up to change the music and staggered a little. Half a bottle of champagne does that to you. Yes, I'd eventually tried drinking it again, for loss of anything better to do. And I have to agree, it had started tasting better with every sip.

I finally made it to the Walkman and changed the song. My tip to every music lover – if you're alone on a rooftop after midnight, *don't* listen to Fear of the Dark. Especially if you're afraid of ghosts and you spot an evil looking chameleon on a plant less than ten feet away.

Owing to the tears flooding my eyes and the effect of alcohol in my blood, I couldn't read anything on the Walkman, I pressed random buttons and the song changed.

As the music started, I got a feeling that it was one of the songs that Ankit had transferred to my Walkman when I had asked him for some good songs. Though, quite predictably, I'd never listened to it. How else could pop music enter my Walkman?

Elliot Yamin's *Wait For You*, I later discovered.

The lyrics instantly caught my attention. How can someone write a song so apt? It suited the situation I was in. Perfectly.

I never felt nothing in the world like this before,
Now I'm missing you
& I'm wishing that you would come back through my door.

Why did you have to go?
You could have let me know.
So now I'm all alone.
You could have stayed,
But you wouldn't give me a chance.
With you not around it's a little bit more than I can stand.
And all my tears they keep running down my face.
Why did you turn away?
So why does your pride make you run and hide?
Are you that afraid of me?
But I know it's a lie what you keep inside,
This is not how you wanted to be.
Baby I will wait for you,
'Cause I don't know what else I can do,
Don't tell me I ran out of time,
If it takes the rest of my life.
Baby I will wait for you,
If you think I'm fine it just ain't true,
I really need you in my life.
No matter what I have to do, I'll wait for you.
I'll Be Waiting . . .

By the time the song ended, I was crying uncontrollably.

A movement behind made me turn around with a jerk. It wasn't a ghost lizard. It was Ankit.

There, standing in front of my eyes, was the most beautiful thing I'd ever laid my eyes on. (I told you about the Porsche being the second most beautiful, remember?)

"You really are here?" No, I wasn't the one who asked that. He seemed equally surprised to find me there.

I looked down at myself and met his eyes. "I guess," I laughed a dry laugh.

"I just got home . . . I was waiting for you guys at the club. Rohan told me you were here . . . I thought he was joking . . ."

"Jaanvi didn't tell you?"

"I forgot my phone at home."

I nodded. "For how long have you been standing here?"

"I came around the time you were shouting, 'Fuck you, Ankit Rai. I'll cut your body into a hundred little pieces and eat them up with a fork'."

"Oh."

"Why fork, though?"

"Manners."

"Ah! Right."

We stood there, in front of each other, smiling . . . unsure what to do next . . . I decided to take the lead.

"Would you mind terribly if I say I've come back to my senses and want to spend the rest of my life with you?"

He stayed silent and continued looking at me.

"How about using your tongue to speak and tell me how you feel? I really can't read minds. I'm no Edward Cullen." I tried humour.

"I was waiting for you to change your mind."

"I won't. It took me an entire month to make up my mind. I'm sticking to my decision."

"And you're sure this time?" Why is he doing this to me? Can't he see? I'm dying here.

"I love you, Ankit," I finally whispered. Oh, so now I'm crying again. Happy?

He smiled. "Finally," he said and took me in his arms. Maybe it was the champagne, maybe because I had been frozen and his embrace gave me the much needed warmth or maybe it was love . . . it felt like heaven. I'd always thought that the whole hugging business was for inferior souls. *Now I know!*

And when he whispered 'I love you too' in my ears, I finally was able to breathe right again.

"I was so scared. I was afraid you'd reject me. And I waited for almost three hours, sitting here all alone in the freezing cold. I thought you would never come . . . that you realised you were too good for me. I thought—"

Ankit put a finger on my lips to shut me up. "Shhh . . . you're ruining the moment. Now I'm here and trust me I'm not going anywhere. Ever."

Our eyes met. He looked at my lips and looked into my eyes again.

Oh my God! He's going to kiss me. What do I do?

He leaned forward. I looked down, looked up, to the left, at him, to the right and down again.

He held my chin, making me look at him and meet his eyes.

There, in the chilly winter night, under a bed of millions of stars and a half moon, I got my first kiss.

No, it wasn't gross. *Far from it.* I speak from personal experience now. (I was glad there wasn't any tongue involved though!)

We broke the kiss, looked at each other and smiled.

Wind blew and I shivered.

I kicked him between his legs.

"Aarghh . . . What the hell! What's wrong with you? *Why did you do that?*" he shouted in exasperation and doubled over in pain.

"It's cold. I've been sitting here for *ages.* Offer me your jacket, boy," I shouted equally loud.

"You could've just said so."

"Yes, but you deserved it."

"*How?* Do you have any idea how *badly* it hurts?"

"Nope. I've never been kicked in the nuts." I stated matter-of-factly. But by the way he was withering in pain and his face had turned into a bright shade of red, I could guess.

"You're unbelievable."

I helped him sit and sat next to him. "Are you okay?" I asked. I was getting a little worried.

"Never been better. Thanks for your concern," he mocked.

"Are you going to offer me your jacket now or do you want to get kicked again? Because you know, I really enjoyed doing that. I'd always wanted to try—"

"Now would be a nice time to warn me of the other things you've always wanted to try," his eyes got all big in horror. *So cute!*

I laughed. "Oh boy! You have no idea what you've gotten yourself into."

"I'm catching up pretty quick," he said and removed his jacket.

"Ahh . . ." I winced as he helped me into it. My arm hurt.

He laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"You should've seen yourself that day. You shouted Viyali's name thrice and literally *dived* into the ground face first!"

"Shut up."

"For someone who doesn't know how to swim, you dive extraordinarily well!"

I joined in his laughter. And we kissed again. Twelve times, or more? I'll let you guess!

Sitting there, under the pale moonlight, champagne inflicting its effect, flowers scattered haphazardly all around us, with the torch batteries finally dead, the food remaining untouched and my make-up all messed up ('waterproof mascara' is a myth. No such thing exists!), I realised what true love meant.

"And just by the way, you look gorgeous tonight."

"Good for you, you remembered to mention that. You wouldn't have liked to get kicked again, would you?"

He laughed. "Why did you make me wait for so long? Such a waste of time . . ."

I thought about that. "You don't like Eminem," I answered seriously. "And you took too long to take your shirt off."

He laughed again. *What am I? A joker?*

"I love you so much."

"I love you too," I looked him in the eye and replied.

Now, the picture was complete.

The untouched dinner called to me and my perennially starved stomach responded.

"I'm starved," I declared and attacked the cake.

Chat-32

The End

January 2011

For those who've had enough of the whole Ronit business, skip this chapter (I usually do!). But in case you're still interested to know how it ended with him, read on . . .

Remember I said I feared that chatting with Ronit again might lead to disasters, owing to my tendency to fall in love with him after every chat?

So, I didn't contact him after committing to Ankit. My decision was strengthened even more after he proved himself as being a cold and heartless bastard.

However, I couldn't stand by my decision for long. I had no idea how my manuscript ended up getting selected by such prestigious publishers, but I'd made up my mind – I wouldn't let such an opportunity go. I *had to* write that book.

And soon.

Let me tell you why so soon . . . when the publishers had called to ask how much of my novel was complete and by when the entire book will be done, I'd panicked and said, "75 percent of it is complete and I'd send in the full book by 25th Jan."

My 5th semester exams ended on 11th Jan, so that gave me a total of fourteen days to write a full book. Fourteen days. Two weeks. Ask me to do stupid things and I'll stop at nothing!

Those two weeks were real hard on me. *Try forgetting someone and writing a book about him at the same time. Sweet life!*

After wasting the first three days trying in vain, I finally kept my ego aside and sent him a Message. I couldn't possibly write a story about him without knowing him! Or could I?

> Vatsala: Can I request an interview with you? I have so many questions to ask you, about you. It'd be better if we do it on chat, as opposed to messages, so that we can have a real conversation. Give me a date and time, preferably this week itself.
>
> Even if the answer is no, at least grace this message with a reply. :)

It had been a long time since we'd last chatted. I wasn't sure he even remembered me.

I was taken aback. His reply shocked me. No, SHOCKED ME!!

> Ronit: Sure . . . just give me a call whenever it suits you . . .
>
> 9876543210

I read that Message thrice. My brain couldn't register what my eyes saw. He gave me his number?

> Vatsala: OMG! Are you serious?
>
> Ronit: Yes!

After hyperventilating for a while, I called Akansha and we discussed what I'd say and, more importantly, what I'd *not* say!

"What if I don't get his accent?"

"Oh, you will. He's from Mumbai. How weird can his accent be?" Akansha assured. Her boyfriend, Tushar, was from Mumbai, too.

"If I don't, I won't ask him to repeat. I'll just say, 'I'd love to say that it was nice talking to you, but sadly, I don't lie. B-bye!'"

"You will *not* say that. And you've heard him speak a million times on TV. Stop fretting."

One hour later, when I did build up a nerve to call him, he didn't receive. I sent him a Message on FB.

> Vatsala: Why do I get a feeling you gave me a random number? :P
>
> I called you and you didn't receive.

Two minutes later, my phone ringed *Ronit Oberoi Himself Calling*.

"Hello?"

"Hey Vatsala!"

And of all the stupid things I could've said, I said, "How do you know that I'm Vatsala?"

"It was pretty easy. I got only one missed call by an unknown number in the last ten minutes and I saw your Message, so . . ."

"Oh!" Yes, that was all I could say as I mentally cursed myself for acting all *witty*.

"And I didn't give you a random number. This really is my number."

"Oh," I repeated. I and my 'oh' moments!

"So, you wanted to talk?"

"I don't know what to say . . ." *Dumb-dumb-dumb.*

"You had some questions to ask?"

"I really don't know what to say . . ." *Dumber-dumber-dumber.*

He said the next few lines very quickly and I caught only a few strings of words from between. He was a VJ and had been an RJ and all, but he *did* have a strange accent!

"Anyway, I got the first copy of my book today and I think you'll . . . buy the book . . . your friends . . . because I've mentioned your name in the acknowledgements."

I caught the last line – Loud and clear. Still, I have no idea why I still acted all dumb! Maybe because it was just too hard to believe.

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Yes!" he laughed.

"Really?" I asked for the third time. Okay, it really was very hard to believe but I didn't have to repeat 'really' like an idiot thrice!

"*Arey!* Why would I lie?"

"Right."

"Hey, listen. I'm at a friend's treat right now, so I'm kind of busy. Catch you later?"

"Okay."

"Bye!"

"B-bye."

I was proud I didn't stammer. Though considering that (in the call that lasted 1 minute 36 seconds) I didn't speak at all, I didn't have much scope!

He mentioned my name in the acknowledgements of his novel. Even if it's just a passing reference to some of his fans, it meant the world to me.

I meant something to him.

But strangely, the thought didn't affect me as it once used to do. The irony of the situation was that I fell in love with him every time I chatted with him. But that night, I talked to him via telephone and I didn't feel even a tinge of emotion for him! Maybe everything else just fades when you have a boyfriend as hot as Ankit by your side.

I do agree that I was overjoyed, but that had more to do with talking to a celebrity and knowing about the acknowledgement thing and less to do with talking to Ronit Oberoi *Himself*.

I'm a strange, strange person.

Things took a turn for worse after that.

Next night, I gave him a call which he didn't pick up.

The night after that, I sent him a Message on Facebook.

Vatsala: Am I ever going to get that interview? I don't know when to call you . . .

He replied on my cell phone.

Ronit: I'll call you tomorrow!!!!
Sorry for the missed calls! Been lazy and busy!!!!

I doubted it was Ronit himself. He was using unusually large number on exclamatory marks. *Whose number did he give me?* Oh God! *Who did I give my number to?*

Vatsala: Ok . . . sure :)
And BTW, missed call, singular! I didn't want to seem too excited/desperate!! :P
Ronit: Hehe! :P :P

That was more like him! He did that a lot, that '*Hehe! :P :P'* thing! I could almost connect to that!

The next day, however, he didn't call. I was facing real big troubles with my novel. I decided to guess answers to the questions I wanted to ask him about his character, but there were several other places where I was stuck. And I didn't know any other writer!

I sent him an SMS asking the word count of his Eyeliner and Cigarettes.

He didn't reply.

I received an SMS from Akansha.

Akansha: What's up?
Vatsala: Sick of everything :(
Akansha: What happened?
Vatsala: The novel . . . it's going nowhere. I hate it.
Akansha: Don't say that! Can I help?
Vatsala: I wish . . . but I need Ronit . . .
Akansha: So he didn't call?
Vatsala: You figured that out all by yourself? Genius!
Akansha: Hehe! You call him? Or send a message to remind?
Vatsala: No way. Never again.
I don't understand why he sent me his number if he never intended to talk.

Akansha: I have an intuition that he gave you his number, but when he told someone about it, that someone didn't like it . . .
Vatsala: If that's the case, then his girl is VERY INSECURE. Or his guy. He's gay.
Akansha: Hahaha! Send him a rude message?
Vatsala: Yeah, saying, 'It's a good thing you're gay, you are going to be kicked at places that'd render your THING useless anyway!' That'd get his attention, don't you think?
Akansha: ARE YOU NUTS???
Vatsala: Hahaha! Totally! The biggest nutcase ever! :P

We bitched about Ronit for another half an hour, then—

Akansha: I sent him a message . . . let's see if he replies!!
Vatsala: OMG! Don't tell me! What did you say?
Akansha: Will tell when he replies . . .
Vatsala: TELL ME RIGHT NOW. You're killing me here.
Akansha: Just asked him to call you as you're upset . . .
Vatsala: Upset? He'll think I'm weak!
Akansha: Shut up! You made up of iron or what? Can't be weak!!
Vatsala: :P :P You're just wasting time. BET! He won't reply.

We had a bet. Akansha had thought Ronit will reply if two of his biggest fans insisted. She didn't know about the 'cold and heartless jerk' incident. Too bad for her, she lost!

Akansha: He didn't reply :(
Vatsala: Told ya! He likes ignoring people!
Akansha: Huh! Mister uploaded his status when I messaged, but didn't care to reply. Now I hate him too :x :x

I love her for saying that. Although our friendship was something that started with our one similarity – a crush on Ronit Oberoi, we became good friends even after we started hating Ronit. Hell, she hated him only because of what he did to me. And that too when she didn't know *anything*.

Vatsala: Ah! Never mind!
Akansha: He's a CERTIFIED PRICK now! Afraid of a little competition, that's what he is, I tell you!
Vatsala: Hahaha!
Akansha: Write a novel better than his. YOU HAVE TO!
Vatsala: That's a HUGE challenge. HUGE! Right now, I'm not sure I'm up to writing even a bad novel! It's difficult, trust me!
Akansha: Never give up. Tell me whenever and wherever you need me!
Vatsala: Yeah, we'll think of something. We don't need him!
Akansha: Exactly. That asshole. Fucking dickhead. Huh! :\

I was angry at Ronit and hated him with all my heart, but ask me to use slang adjectives for him. I can't. I simply can't. I had to change the topic.

Vatsala: :P :P You're on my acknowledgement list!
Akansha: OH!! Glad! And Ronit?
Vatsala: Off it! And off the dedication page too!
Akansha: YOU WERE DEDICATING IT TO HIM??
Vatsala: Hmmm . . . the book being about him . . . it seemed right . . . Not anymore!
Akansha: His loss! He won't ever find someone who'd dedicate her novel to him!!!

It was hardly a sentimental dialogue. So I have no idea why tears filled my eyes instantaneously. I find figuring out sentiments hard; others' or mine.

The best response I could come up with was:

Vatsala: :P :P

Three days later, I received an SMS from Ronit telling the word count of Eyeliner & Cigarettes. I didn't send him a thank you message. It wasn't like he'd helped me or anything. I'd already made the calculations for my L@F by then.

Jaanvi asked, "Your Ronit helped?"

"*Naah*! And anyway, I hate him now. Forever!"

"Another four-day-long forever?"

I laughed and pulled her cheeks, "You're funny!"

"Hey, I know that you've changed a little . . . but this cheek-pulling thing is too mushy even for me!" We laughed.

Amazingly, I somehow did complete the entire novel in fourteen days' time. You're holding it in your hand. When I and Jaanvi discussed it later, we both agreed that *Love @ Facebook* was supremely lame a title. We decided to stick to it nevertheless. Lame names are in! People dig them!

Akansha was a big help. The chats I used to send her were of some use after all! She gave me the passwords (weird ones at that!) for her Yahoo mail! Account (FB sent backup mails to her that e-mail id) and her Facebook Account. So, she had all the chats I'd

had with Ronit saved and I had entire Message Threads in my Facebook Account, as I never really could make myself delete a single Message from a certain guy who goes by the name of Ronit.

And so, I completed the novel without Ronit's help. Though my fingers itched to call him, I didn't give in to the temptation even once. And trust me, it was difficult. Knowing he was just a phone call away, yet resisting tenaciously, for the sake of my self-esteem.

And I was way too hurt.

Our relationship lasted for six chats each in September and October, thirteen in November, seven in December and a few in January. (Plus about twenty more in the span of those five months that weren't interesting enough to be featured in this book! And another string of Messages he chose to ignore.) In the duration of which, I fought for him with eleven people on his Wall/Photos/Status, ignored Friend Requests from nine people and Blocked five people. And believe me you, a couple of girls hit on me too! Ugh.

And he Liked seventeen of my Photos (I still take pride in that figure! Seventeen is a big deal!)

It ended with one call and a couple of *no calls*!

I deleted my Comments from his Notes and from the Photos where they had gone unnoticed. I didn't delete the ones to which he had replied though; it would've made him look like a fool, talking to himself! Ok, I agree I *was* tempted to do so more than once, during my bouts of anger! But I told you, I'm loyal and believe fans should be die-hard. Although I found it difficult to respect him as much as I once did, I'd be devastated if I somehow make him look bad in public. I would never betray anyone like that.

After the phone call incident, the Ronit fever subsided so quickly that I found it hard to believe I ever fell for that guy, that there was a time when I literally worshipped him. He was like a God to me.

He lost his charm by giving me his number and making himself too available. (Not that he received any of my calls!).

I liked being his fan and dreaming about the bright future we'd have together. But when I actually got his number and thus a chance to be his friend, the prospect no longer allured me.

Although I sometimes wished he didn't know me at all. I missed posting silly Comments everywhere at his space.

I missed being his fan.

Epilogue
Nothing Else Matters

December 31st 2011 & New Year 2012

Life at Mumbai didn't turn out to be quite as scary as I'd imagined. I've rented a tiny apartment with a sweet Bengali girl, Chhavi. Chhavi works at my channel and is also a freelance model. She was recently cast in a shampoo ad in which her hair looked unbelievably dazzling. Animation is what haircare products' ads thrive on.

We both came to Mumbai from small towns and our languages underwent drastic changes. We've moved from my *hum-tum* and her *aami-tumi* to a more conventional *main-tu*. She's trying to teach me Bengali and I'm trying to teach her Bhojpuri (though I don't know the language very well myself!). We both know we'll never be able to learn each other's mother tongues, but trying to learn/teach never failed to give us a good laugh.

And oh! She's not afraid of small dragons and is an awesome cook. I'm in love with her. (No, not in that way, I'm perfectly straight!)

After coming to Mumbai, I've come to love Ranchi's weather. Compared to the brutal rainfall this city faces, Ranchi rains seem too feeble, almost like a cool breeze.

Because of the humid atmosphere and pollution, I've even started to bathe more regularly.

Ankit and I had moved here after completing our graduations. Ankit is presently pursuing MBA from S.P. Jain Institute, while owing to a stroke of good luck; I landed a job as an anchor at a leading News Channel. The show I hosted was about Bollywood stars, movies, music and TV gossip and was telecasted on weekends. Nothing big, but I meet plenty of Stars now. The biggest crush I've had since joining my job is on Hrithik Roshan. (I don't have an issue with too-many-muscles anymore!)

Avi doesn't have a problem with my choice anymore. He adores Hrithik!

I had not needed to become an RJ. Nor had I needed to take a degree in Mass Comm. And although I'm not a VJ on MTV as planned, I'm more than content with my present job. I have big plans for the future, of course! I have to become a Star, after all!

Jaanvi decided that studying is too monotonous and boring for her to deal with anymore. That realisation and her royally screwed up CAT results made her decide to take her dancing seriously. So she set up dance classes at Ranchi where she taught all variants of dance to people of all ages and earned a pretty huge sum of money in return. Last I heard one of her students was putting the moves on her, if you know what I mean! And she's going on a vacation to South Africa. The whole dance class thing turned out to be pretty lucrative! She is a Star in her own way!

And Ronit?

Yes, I eventually did forgive him for being a cold and heartless jerk and a certified prick. Mostly because I do understand now that one simply cannot be expected to pay a fan as much attention as I'd been expecting from him. The amount of attention he had been paying was already too much to ask for. So I let him off the hook.

And yes, I'm still in touch with him; we chat about once a month. But the crush has blown over big time and he is history to me

now. *He lost his chance!* Or so I like to think!

His movie? As I said, when have VJs done anything good to themselves or the movie whenever they'd acted in one? *Velvet Ropes* was a big flop. I watched it thrice.

His novel did pretty well though. (And my name really was there in the acknowledgements! I was thrilled. That was the first time I saw my name in print!) *Eyeliner & Cigarettes* topped the bestseller list for quite some time. I hated it. Hey come on, you already know I'm abnormally strange!

For the obsession I once had with Ronit Oberoi, I hold no regrets – if something good comes out of a stupid crush, it's worth it. Especially if that 'something good' is something as great as getting a respectable job, a good friend (Oh, Akansha and Tushar are still very much in love with each other!) and a loving, and more importantly *HOT* boyfriend, its hard to hold grudge!

Though I do hope I'd run into Ronit somewhere someday. *It's a small world, and definitely smaller Mumbai!*

My doorbell chimes.

"Hey," I greet Ankit with a kiss and a hug.

"Hi there!" I don't let him call me Honey or Sweetie or Cutie Pie or the like. *I'm not something to eat!* (But mostly because such endearments remind me of things to eat and as you know, I'm eternally starved!).

"I want to play something for you," I take him by the hand and make him sit. Chhavi makes herself scarce, right after winking at me and motioning something X-rated and supremely vulgar with her hands.

I had started taking guitar classes mostly because my job demanded very little time from me and paid me way too much. I had no idea what to do with the money and I have loads of time as Ankit is busy with his college most of the time.

And the other reason is, obviously, my passion for music. *If not a singer, maybe a DJ someday . . .*

This is the first time I am going to play something for Ankit. I have chosen *Nothing Else Matters* by Metallica for the occasion. After that one lapse of judgement exactly one year ago, I haven't liked or listened to *Wait For You* or any other Pop song since. Well, with just one exception– Enrique has made his way back to my Walkman.

Another good thing that came out of my stupid crush on Ronit was that I discovered Heavy Metal! I didn't eat two meals the day I discovered that Metallica had retired and so had stopped performing. It broke my heart. So I bought all their DVDs and let myself listen to only one new song every week. This way, I can savour every song and the collection will last longer! Clever, *haan*?

Though I love all songs by them, I have always been particularly partial to *Nothing Else Matters*. . . the lyrics called to me. . .

So close, no matter how far
Couldn't be much more from the heart
Forever trusting who we are
And nothing else matters.
I never opened myself this way
Life is ours, we live it our way
All these words I don't just say
And nothing else matters.
Yeah, trust I seek and I find in you
Everyday for us something new
Open mind for a different view
And nothing else matters.
Never cared for what they do
Never cared for what they know
And I know.
So close . . .

Ankit gives me a standing ovation as I hit the last chords on my guitar.

"You were wonderful."

"Come on, it wasn't that good!" I smile. Modesty and humility are traits I've learned from Ronit.

"It was."

"You're just trying to flatter me to get into my pants!"

"Damn! How do you always get to know?"

"I read minds."

We kiss.

I would not like to comment on the physical front of our relationship. All I'll say is that I've made a few discoveries and I don't find certain things gross anymore!

And oh! In a completely unrelated way of physical relationship, I did get to punch him on open-jaw once and spray shaving foam

(for the lack of pepper-spray) in his eyes at another occasion. I'd always wanted to try those. Amongst other things!

He put up with all the crazy tantrums I throw, and I throw tantrums to keep him entertained.

He brings me flowers every once in a while and I let him take advantage of me in return.

He takes care of me when I fall sick and I feign bad health to grab all his care.

He listens to my endless blabber and I blabber endlessly to get his attention!

He loves me and I love him.

Nothing else matters.

SEPTEMBER

OCTOBER

NOVEMBER